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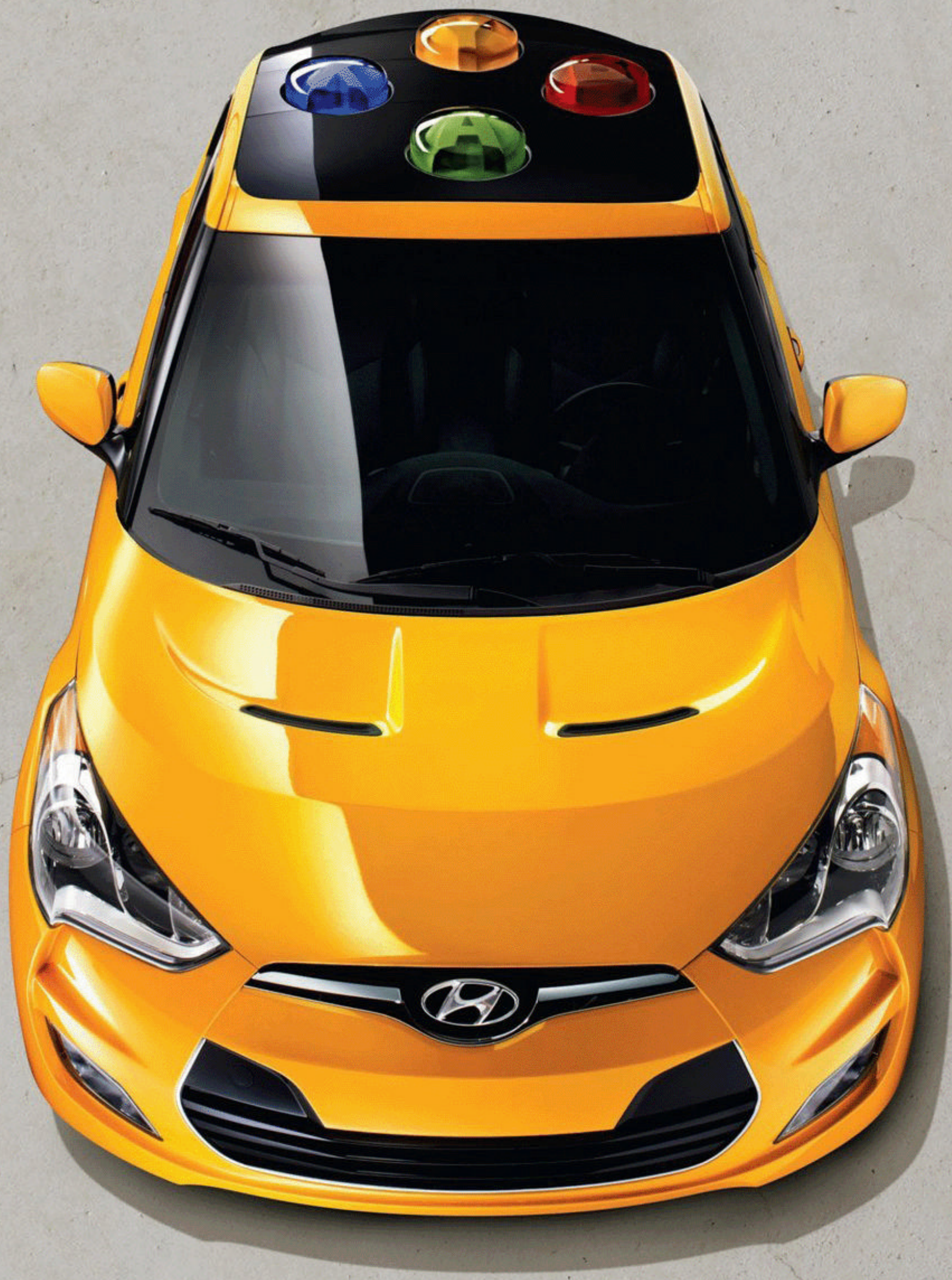

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Of course the Veloster is a blast to drive. And since you can plug in and play your Xbox 360® on its 7-inch touchscreen, it's even fun when parked. YouTube.com/VELOSTER. **Engineered for whatever.**

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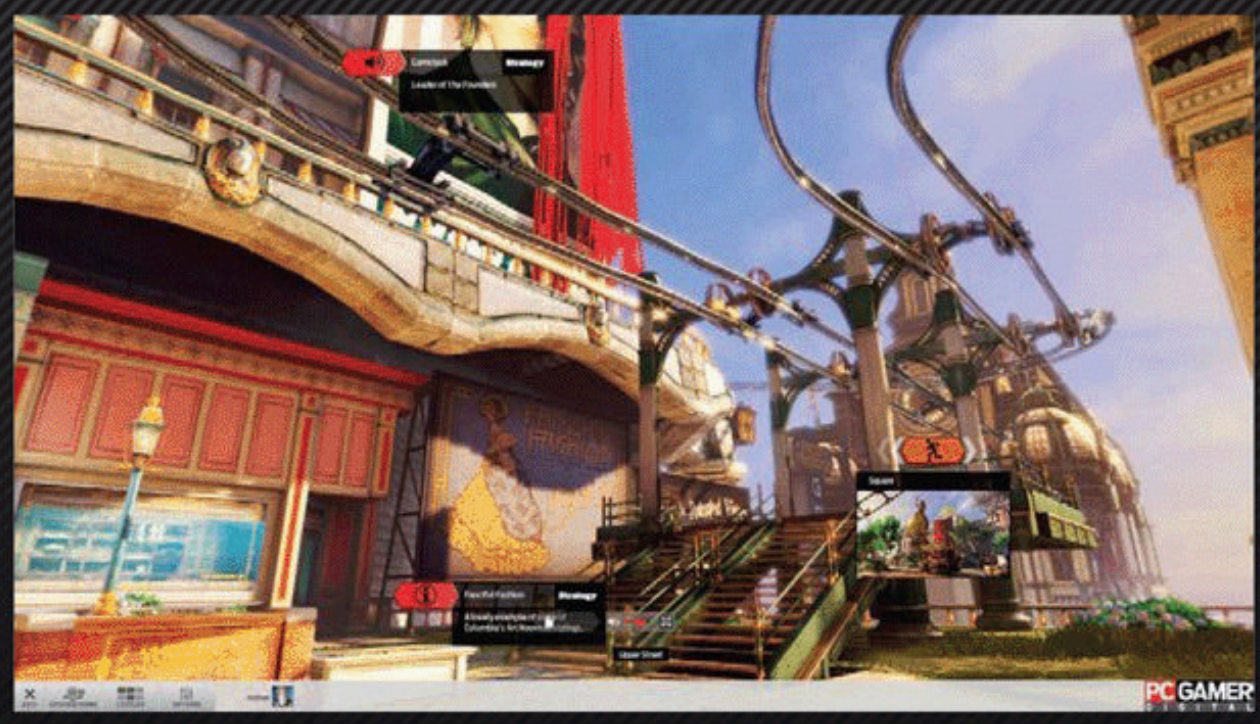

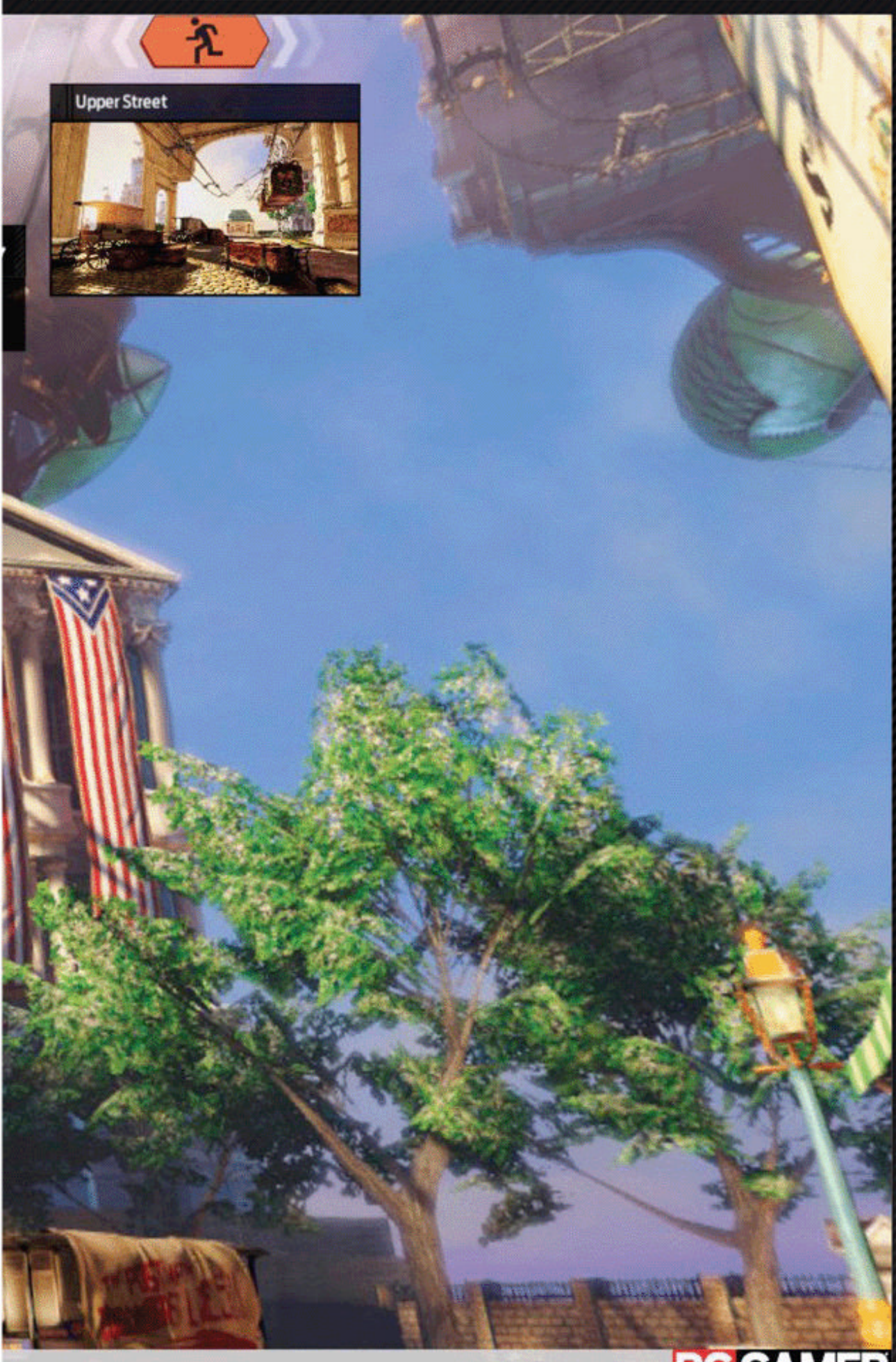

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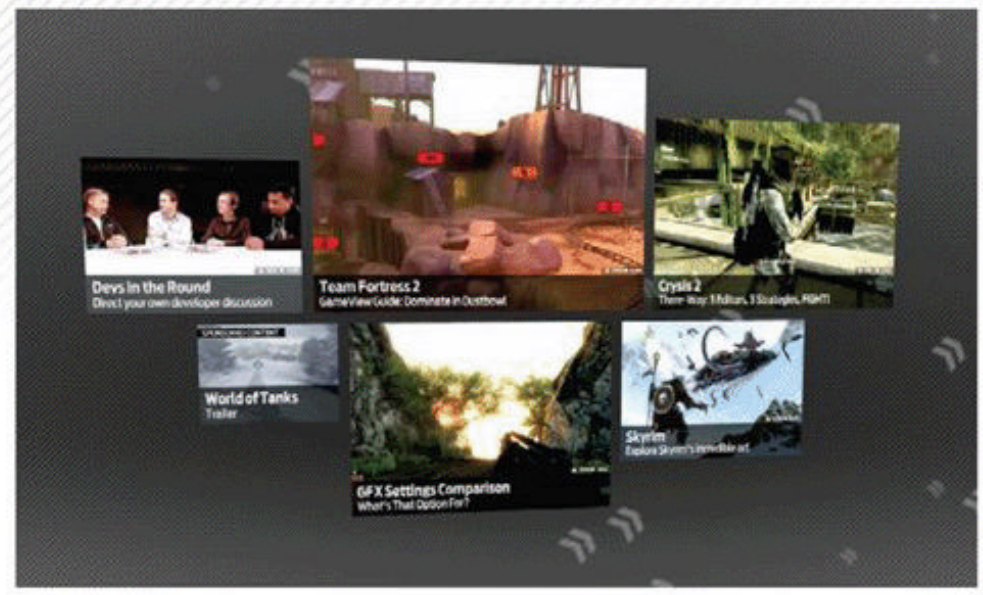
"There's crap in my nostrils! You blasted monkey!" the human whined, frantically wiping the filth off his face. But it was too late. George's muscular, hairy arms tagged the fool right in the kisser, knocking him 10 feet backward, out cold. At the same time, I did a double backflip, breaking the other human's armlock on me. I landed behind him, and yanked at his ankles, planting his nose into the concrete. "Damn you, apes!" he screamed. "Damn you all to hell!"

The Trifecta

I could begin by calling your attention to *PC Gamer*'s exclusive sit-down with the brainiacs behind *Diablo III* on page 48 but, let's face it—you went there first. I know I would have. In fact, it's entirely likely that you're reading this page of the magazine last, and even then only because it's easier than getting off the couch. In that event, I'll take my brief moment in the spotlight to show you something you may not have seen yet: PC Gamer Digital.



There's no gaming platform as advanced as the PC. Even the most retrograde flat-Earther understands this. So we set out to create a new kind of medium that's every bit as sophisticated, adaptable, and revolutionary as PC gaming itself. But talking about it is kind of like trying to describe a LOLcat: you're much better off just seeing it for yourself.

And you can do that, right now, for free, through Steam. If you've already got the Steam client, just search for PC Gamer Digital from the Store page (if you don't, grab it at www.steampowered.com). Again, the PC Gamer Digital application is free, and includes a dazzling first-person, 360-degree, navigable strategy guide that teaches you how to dominate in *Team Fortress 2*'s Dustbowl map, as well as a unique "slider" gallery that lets you compare and contrast the effect of those obscure video options in your games. These are just a couple examples of the content you'll find in PC Gamer Digital that hint at what's possible in this groovy, homebrewed new medium—one that will continue to evolve with new features, the same way games do, with each weekly episode. (You heard right—weekly!)

We love our laid-back console brothers and sisters, but we PC gamers are a different breed entirely: we're more creative, more sophisticated, and we demand more choices. So you'll still get up-to-the-minute PC gaming news from www.pcgamer.com, and you'll still enjoy *PC Gamer Magazine* every month—in print as well as on your PCs, tablets, netbooks, and smartphones. And now you've got yet another option in PC Gamer Digital: a digital companion that puts PC games coverage as far ahead of the pack as PC gaming itself.

LOGAN DECKER
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Your emails, Facebooks, Twitters, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

BACK CHATTER

- I've always wanted to be Argonian in *Skyrim*. I could just chill out underwater and let time pass while things above water wanted me to die and go make a sandwich. ***Tyler Booth***

- I ♥ *PC Gamer* reviews more than any other site's. The percent I agree with your ratings is around 92.3, repeating of course... ***John Hudson***

- Valve could release a program that had a 90 percent chance of making my computer explode, and if they gave you a free hat in *TF2* every time you ran it I would never ever not be running it. ***Fraser Shepherd***

- Oh God. Blizzard and its *Diablo III* skill/talent calculators. My one weakness... ***DispleasedEskimo***

- I don't like the direction that's been taken with *Diablo III*, but I am physically incapable of resisting build calculators and ability lists. It irks me that bad decisions at a commercial level are marring a game which, at a gameplay level, looks excellent. ***Chumbaniya***

- For those that haven't played *Bloodline Champions*, please give it a try. You don't know what you're missing, especially if you like competitive games like *TF2*, *DotA*, *LoL*, etc. ***Mizotu***

Reruns can be good

Thanks to Richard Cobbett for writing "Demo Mission Derby" in the October issue. I've always been someone who couldn't get much replay value out of games; however, after reading the article I decided to start up a few of the games that I owned such as *Crysis*, *Torchlight*, and *Just Cause 2*. I'm now hooked on these games all over again—I'm off to see what other games I can have even more fun with. ***Kody Ward***

That's great to hear, as we encourage recycling in all forms. Well, almost all forms—we've given up on passing used gum around the office. ***PCG***

Sacrilegious statement

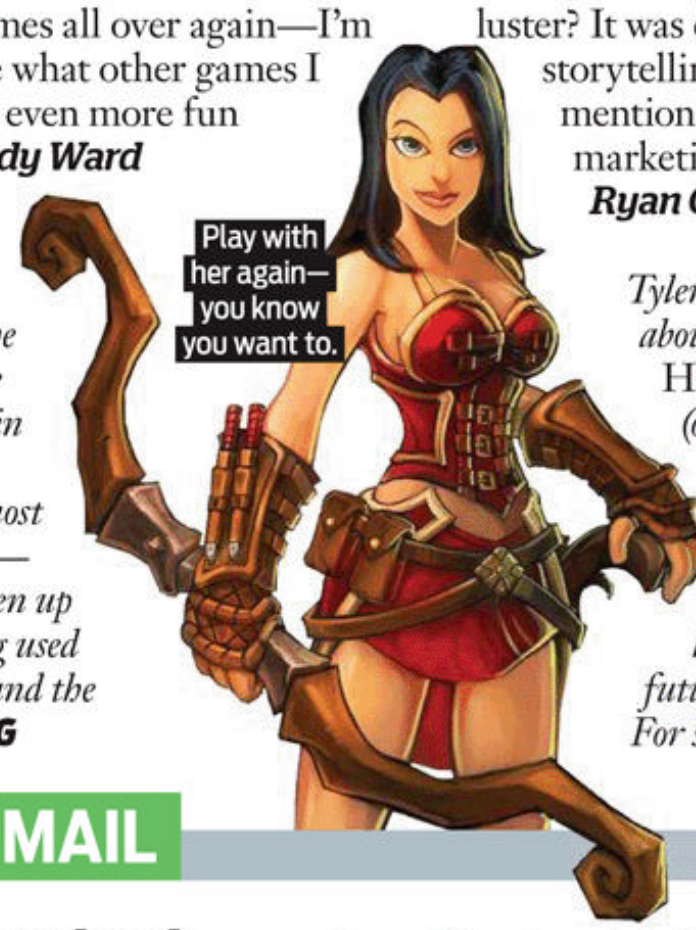
How could Tyler take a shot at *Half-Life*'s ending in October's Face Off? *Half-Life* is one of the most immersive experiences in gaming, and it still holds up today, leaving you wondering just what the hell was going to happen to Gordon Freeman next. How exactly is that lackluster? It was excellent, smart storytelling, not to mention even smarter marketing. ***Ryan Cook***

Tyler has no regrets about his dismissal of Half-Life*'s ending (or that thing that happened in Vegas that one time), but as you say, it did leave Gordon's future wide open. For some, however, the mysterious deus ex machina in a suit seemed like a lackluster way to set up absolutely any sequel Valve felt like making. Of course, that sequel was* Half-Life 2*, and if little Tyler had known then what he knows now, he may have not have been so disappointed.* ***PCG***

Three dimensions of awesome

I'm an avid fan of *PC Gamer*, and I'm a long-time fan of 3D (I have an old picture of me with my VFX 3D and motion simulator). It was very cool playing *Descent* and *Pod Racer* in 3D! These days I game with a 3D projector and an eight-foot screen. The industry must be recognizing the appeal, with AMD now aggressively in the competition with Nvidia. Their exclusive 3D support in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* was a real coup and possibly an indicator of things to come. So how about a section in your mag for us fans of 3D gaming? ***Elseven***

As the trend expands, you'll definitely be seeing more coverage of 3D hardware in Hard Stuff. This month, we have reviews of a 3D LG monitor on page 91 and Nvidia's latest 3D glasses on page 94. ***PCG***



THE HOT MAIL

Shortcut to ban-land

In the review of the Thermaltake Black Element mouse in the October issue, Jonathon Cooper says that you can "have a button that does what normally takes two buttons to do, like selecting all units in *StarCraft II*." As we all know, *StarCraft II* is Blizzard's e-sport baby, and they take good care of it. I sent Blizzard an email asking about macros and *StarCraft*, and received this response: "If the macro is going to lower the number of button presses to get something done via hotkeys, it would be considered an exploit and an unfair advantage." I'd hate for anyone to lose their account because they were excited about their new, shiny hardware. ***Wes Reid***

Thank you for the friendly reminder—we never endorse cheating here at PCG. Though nearly every gaming peripheral supports macros (including Razer's SC2-branded keyboard), it's true that Blizzard's terms of service forbid macros, so you're risking your account if you use them. ***PCG***

A great letter deserves a great prize; that's why we're sending Wes a copy of *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine* in appreciation of his stellar correspondence. Ping us at letters@pcgamer.com with a question, comment, or rage-fueled rant to earn your chance to win next month's **PRIZE OF MYSTERY**!

Loss of control

When the original music from *Deus Ex* started playing in *Human Revolution*, I peed a little. ***Justin***

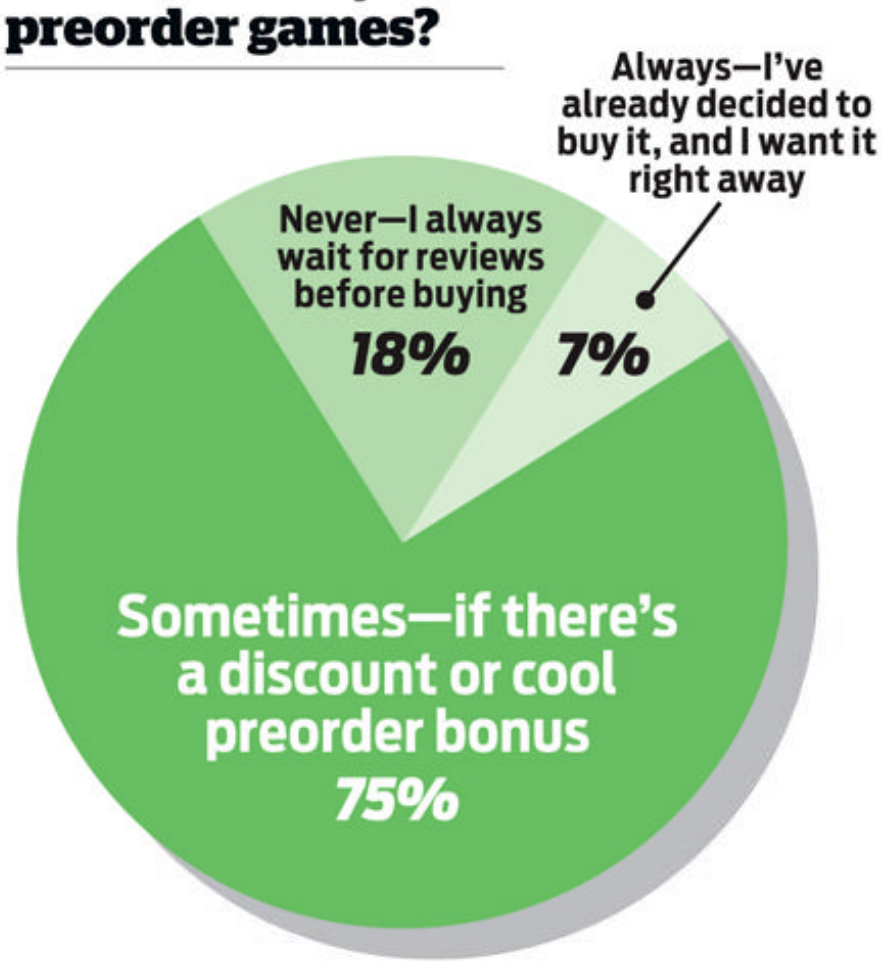
We did too. Then we went to the doctor, who told us the two events were unrelated. Bummer. ***PCG***

Catch modding fever

I've been very curious about checking out mods, especially for *Minecraft* (what else would be monopolizing my time these days?). However, I'm hesitant to install mods because they seem

PC GAMER POLL

How often do you preorder games?



How could you possibly think that?

I'll preorder if I'm suitably certain of a game's quality, otherwise I'll wait for reviews. ***Gerald Bayly***

A wiser man than myself once said that preordering is like handing your money to the publisher/developer and saying, "I don't care about the quality, here's my cash." ***Chris Longoria***

I would only preorder if I'm a huge fan of the series, but that's rare. ***Courtney Wellman***

I never preorder. I must play the demo first before I decide to buy it. ***David Macdonald Ajang***

How about just "Sometimes, if I know I want the game. Otherwise I try to wait for the GOTY edition!" ***Karl Bunk***

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BACK CHATTER

- There's no time to eat in *Minecraft* when you're mining for diamonds! DIAMONDS!! ***Epwna***
- I will pass on *Battlefield 3*. If EA think they can use this game to force Origin down my throat, they are sadly mistaken. ***Richard Peckett***
- The *Skyrim* gameplay trailer: 20 minutes of sheer bliss. ***Safor***
- I've played *Dead Island* for almost seven hours, and the only gun I've seen was a quest reward revolver that was four levels too high for me, so I couldn't pick it up. ***Jimmeh***
- I loved the original *Max Payne* games, and I'll be very anxious to try the new one. I don't care if it sucks—to me that game is the grandfather of bullet time and I can't wait! ***Anthony Kubli***
- Spend less money on putting in ridiculous DRM and more money on making good games. That's something Ubisoft should consider. ***Christoffer Friberg***

Minecraft PCG cow loves mods.

like a good way to get jacked by a hacker. ***Troy Williams***

You worry too much, Troy! Mods are no more or less likely to carry a virus than any other file downloaded from the internet. The possibility does exist, but as long as you're using some reasonable form of virus scanner, such as Microsoft Security Essentials (which is free), there's very little to worry about. Mod away! ***PCG***

Pay as you want

Interesting poll in your November issue ("How're you feeling about the recent surge of free-to-play games?"). I was wondering how many of the 66 percent who like free-to-play games plunk down some money. I'm pretty sure 100 percent of the 24 percent who prefer retail pricing pays for what they're playing. ***Santaka***

While the exact percentage varies, most developers of free-to-play games say they need fewer than 10 percent of players to open their wallets in order for the game to be profitable. And though some will only spend a few dollars, hardcore players can end up spending hundreds of dollars in a game, well over the typical $50 price for a traditional retail game. They call these players "whales," and just a few of them can more than make up for the freeloading majority. ***PCG***

Spec central

Reinstall is a great section and idea, but why would you not include information on whether or not the game will work on XP, Vista, and Windows 7? ***Edward Sawacki***

All of them do! We make it a point to only feature Reinstall games that work on modern systems without hassle, and that are available for purchase from download services like Good Old Games or Steam. The versions that are for sale have been updated and tweaked to play nice with your twenty-first century PC, so if you see it in Reinstall, you can be sure you can run it. ***PCG***

Unfinished business

With so many great games to play and not enough time to play them all, I am sure many people do not have time to finish all games they start. Do you find it better to start over or resume from a saved game when you did not finish a single-player game? Does your opinion change if it is a long RPG-style game where you already invested many hours? Does the length of time since you last played affect your decision? ***Jason Hartnell***

All the PCG *editors have different approaches. Some can pick up playing a game wherever they left off, no matter how long it's been or how complicated the story, while others prefer a fresh start. And 100 percent of us have fully deluded ourselves into thinking that someday we'll actually go through and complete those unfinished games.* ***PCG***

Ah, the good old days of gaming.

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Playing with Windows 8

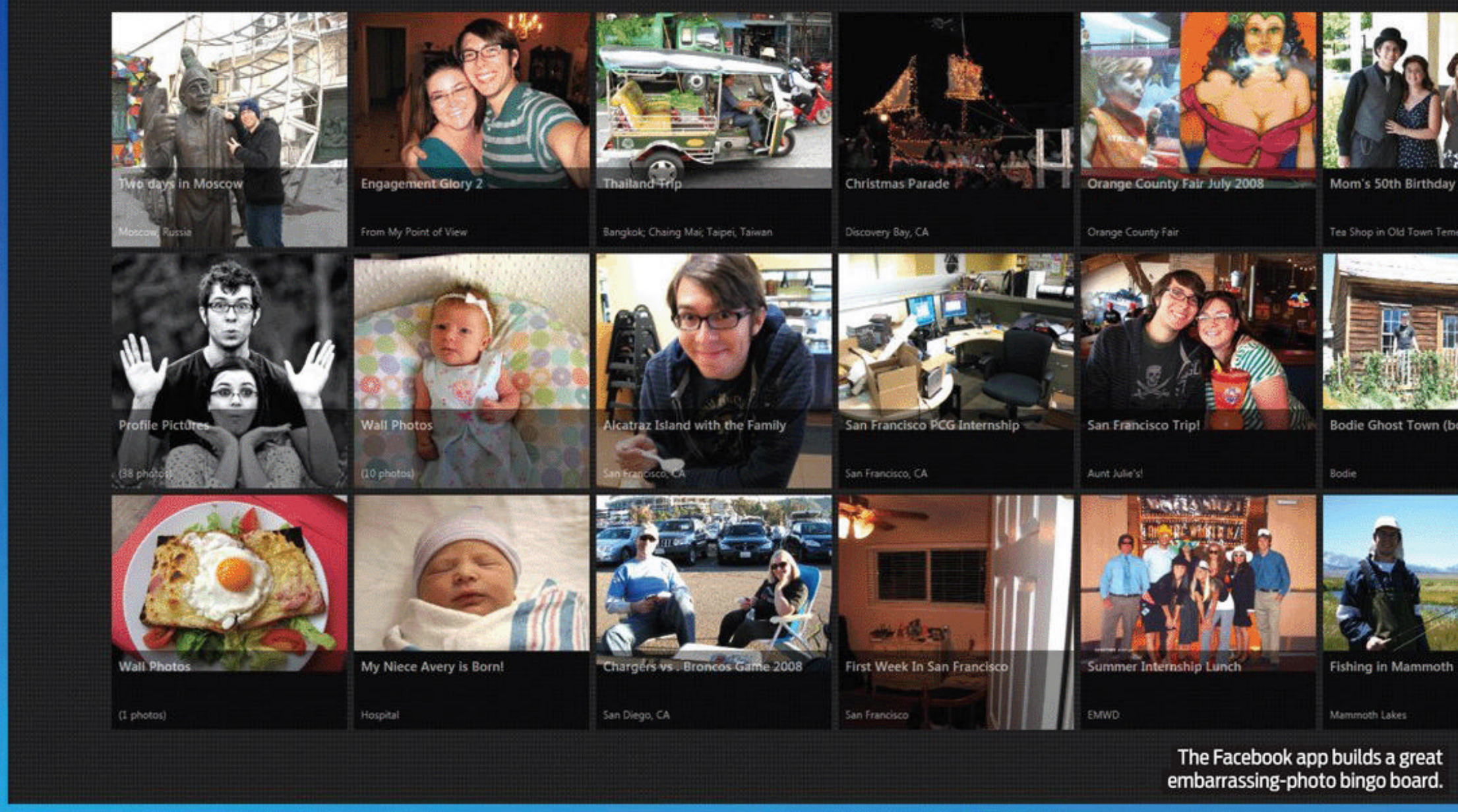
What does Microsoft's new OS mean for PC gamers? ***by Rich McCormick***

Windows 8 won't be out for general release until late 2012, but that hasn't stopped Microsoft releasing a preview build so coders can make programs to run on its new baby. We've had some time with this version, and we're slightly closer to answering our main question: what does Windows 8 mean for PC gamers?

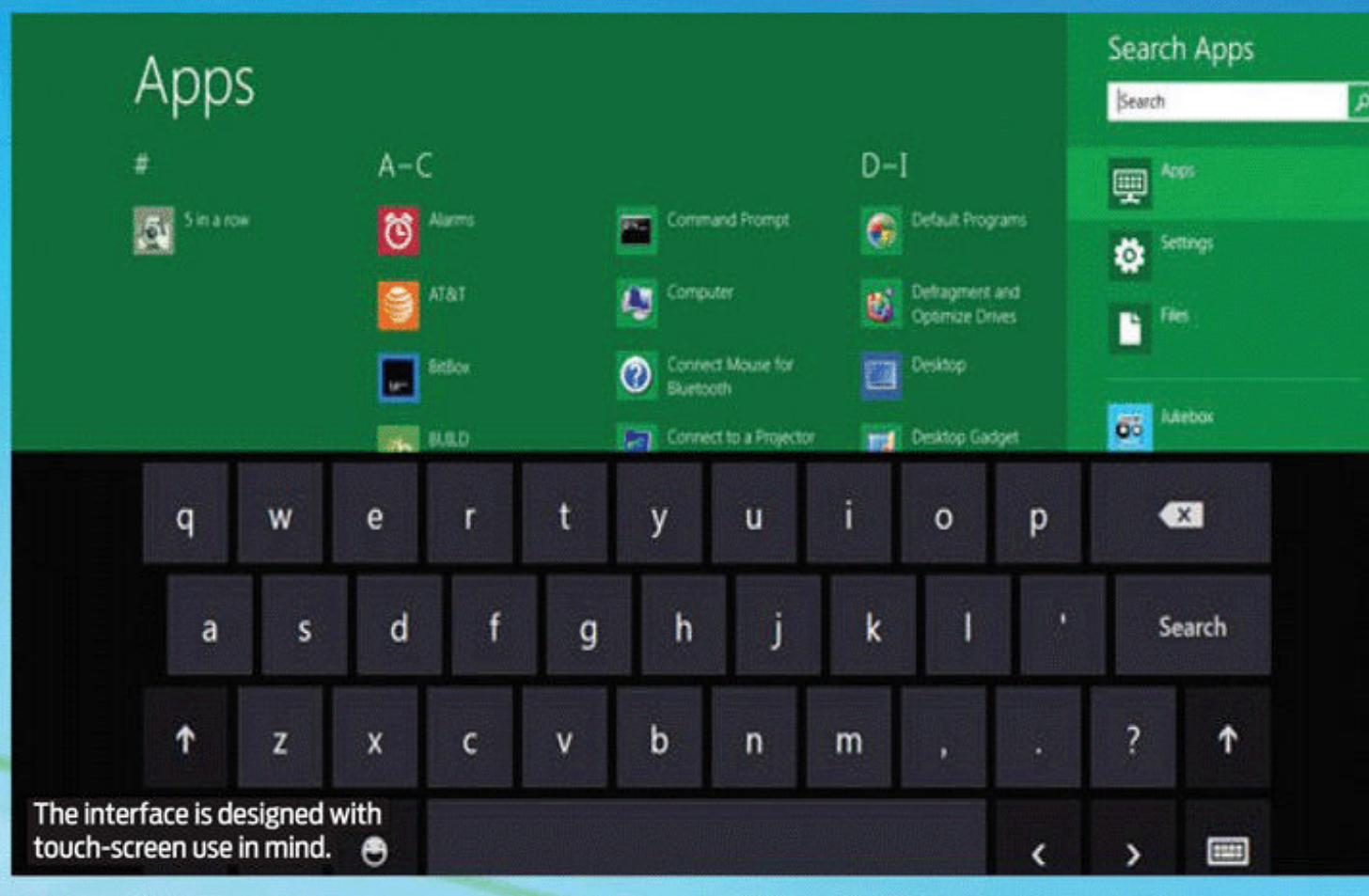
The new OS has taken its inspiration from Microsoft's Windows Phones, focusing its technology on touch-screen PCs. Press the Start button now, and you're greeted with a screen-filling mosaic of programs: if you've got access to a touch-screen monitor or laptop, flipping between these can be done with a slide of the finger. But touch-screens aren't the norm, and Windows 8 feels a little clunky for those of us still riding our mice around our desks. The lack of a start menu and the obfuscation of your desktop by the shiny new program gallery feels a little weird when we're used to total access.

The developers' preview comes with games designed for touch-screen control, but they're little more than distractions, closer to first-wave iPhone games than *PC Gamer* fare. Microsoft has backed so far away from PC gaming in recent years that even the most wildly optimistic won't be expecting Windows 8 to revolutionize it. Rather than wooing us, Microsoft is hoping instead to lure Xbox 360 players under the umbrella of the PC.

Microsoft showed Windows 8's potential Xbox Live integration at the BUILD Conference in September. Internet rumor prior to the event suggested Microsoft would let people play Xbox games on their PC, but Larry Hyrb—Xbox's Major Nelson evangelist—went some way toward clarifying this, suggesting Xbox Live would be a service available across PC and console: "It will be easy for developers to create games for Windows 8 that take advantage of the power of Xbox Live."

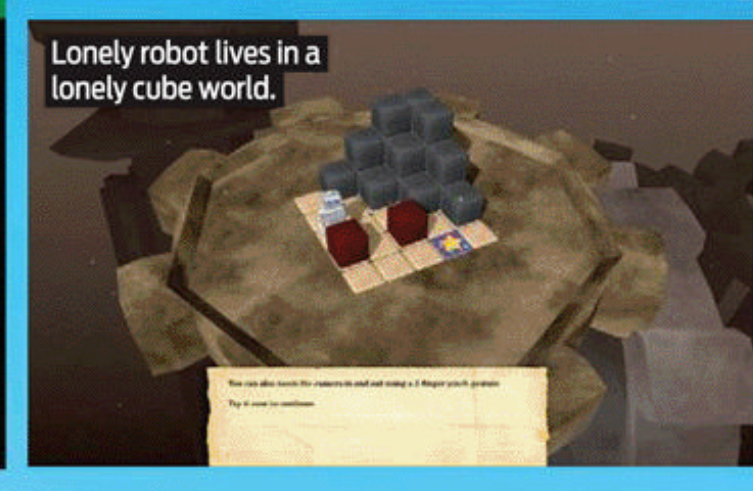


The Facebook app builds a great embarrassing-photo bingo board.



The interface is designed with touch-screen use in mind.

Some things never change: the bundled games are as dreary as ever.



Lonely robot lives in a lonely cube world.

The downside is that it's likely we'll have to pay for the pleasure of using Xbox Live.

Previous attempts to do something similar have ended with the mutated, fly-blown carcass that is Games for Windows Live. But if Microsoft is putting its weight behind gaming integration in Windows 8, we might see a system as robust as Xbox Live in our games. The downside of Microsoft following its 360 roadmap, however, is that it's likely we'll have to pay for the pleasure of using Xbox Live.

We'll have more Windows 8 details as we get more time with it. For now, the touch-screen and cross-platform direction the OS is taking won't be of huge interest to core PC gamers—be happy, then, that it promises to be even more lightweight and unobtrusive when running your games than Windows 7. ■

Turn your *Minecraft* world into a 3D model.

Block by block

Make spectacular art from *Minecraft*'s world

Minecraft players have built amazing worlds, but sometimes they want something that will do more visual justice to their hard work than a laggy YouTube video. Thankfully, there are options available to help you turn your creations into awesome 3D images.

You need a special program to make images of *Minecraft*'s world. MCobj manages it spectacularly. It's a neat little command-line app that exports *Minecraft* worlds as 3D models for use in rendering applications, such as the freely available Blender.

Doing it this way, rather than using a program that spits out an isometric image (such as the still-brilliant MCMap: *bit.ly/oaEnYs*) gives you a lot more control over what you see. You can change the angle and move the focus. And the rendering power of Blender gives the shaky graphics of *Minecraft* a crisp, plastic, toy-like look. It feels like you could reach out and pluck the pirate ship from the water.

The process is a bit complicated, but the trouble is worth it to see your creations in Blender-vision. You'll need to feel comfortable working in Windows' console mode (type CMD in the search bar) in order to output a Blender-compatible file. The tutorial at bit.ly/nhK64Z is the clearest explanation of the steps needed.

You'll need to own *Minecraft* (www.minecraft.net), MCobj (bit.ly/o5iWhs), and Blender (www.blender.org). Place MCobj into a folder in your C: drive to make finding it easier.

With a little time, a lot of patience, and some Googling, you'll be able to elevate your *Minecraft* build to something gorgeous. ■ ***Craig Pearson***

DOCUMENTARY MISTAKES ARMA 2 FOR REAL FOOTAGE

NEWSBEAT HUMAN ERROR TO BLAME FOR LOLOLOLOLOL

The British documentary *Exposure: Gaddafi* aimed to explain the links between the former Libyan leader and the IRA using dramatic 1988 footage of the latter shooting down a British helicopter. "No one died in this attack," said the voiceover.

Which seems reasonable, given that the footage was a fan-made clip taken from military simulator *Arma 2*. Filmmaker ITV apologized, saying it was "an unfortunate case of human error." **GS**

GLITCH IS A GO

COMPETITORS INDIE MMO FROM FLICKR FOUNDER COMES OUT OF BETA

The number of free-to-play MMOs is rapidly growing, but very few of them take place inside the minds of 11 giants. *Glitch*, in which players help shape the future of the world, is side-scrolling, runs in your browser, and is now playable by all.

Created by Flickr cofounder Stewart Butterfield, *Glitch* has players work together to design its persistent world. People craft items and are rewarded for giving them away to fellow players, or for "donating" their possessions to the giants by throwing them down a hole. Play it now at www.glitch.com. **GS**

SAY WHAT?

THE MONTH IN TONGUES

"With some of our early experiments in putting a direct control scheme into the game via a 360-like analog controller, I've been thinking, 'Oh this feels even better.'"

Jay Wilson, *Diablo III* lead designer, enraging clickers

"If we had the largest budget in the world I'd love to make something like ***Oblivion*** set in the ***Adventure Time*** universe. It might be fun to make it have ***Monster Hunter***-style gameplay with ***Katamari*** graphics."

Pendelton Ward, on how he'd make an *Adventure Time* game

"The underperformance I think was just a release timing issue."

James Cameron, on why the terrible *Avatar* game didn't sell

THE SPY

Mexico. The hotel-room fan is all that's keeping The Spy sane. The comforting *whumph* of the blades stirs the warm air. The Spy lies naked, sweating on his bed, focusing on the regularity of the rhythm. All around him, on the walls, the ceiling, even the mirror, is one word scrawled over and over and over.

"Belle."

> **The Spy rummaged in Chet Faliszek's chin hair.**

It's not The Spy's writing; it's Craig's. Has The Spy's ex cast her spell over him as well? The electronically altered voice on the phone told The Spy to track him down, that he had fled with a suitcase of money. That was fine, The Spy has worked with him for 10 years. This would be easy. But then he made it personal.

The first place The Spy looked was Valve. Craig had often said he'd hide in Chet Faliszek's beard if things were going down. The Spy drugged and bound the developer and rummaged in his chin hair, but the tiny Scot was nowhere to be found—just an empty tin of shortbread. A list fell out of Chet's pocket: "weaponizer Ep 3 ideas" with the descriptions of a gun called "the weaponizer" and filenames appended "concrete," "liquid," "metal," "flamethrower," and "icegun." What is this "weaponizer"? Is this an experiment to change or even replace the series' signature gravity gun? The Spy doesn't know, but there are whispers Gordon Freeman is about to break for cover. The Spy left via zipline.

As the zipline squealed, The Spy's thoughts turned to Belle. Her last communiqué, the Dear John letter, had turned out to have a microdot of information on it. It was the formula for breeding a cow that could deliver pre-mixed White Russians, Craig's favorite drink. Was this her way of telling The Spy she'd moved on and was taking that duplicitous Scottish guy with her?

The Spy decided to lay a trap, using George RR Martin's *Game of Thrones* series. Both Belle and Craig were fans. Everyone knows there's the strategy game from Cyanide, but The Spy has dug up talk of an RPG based on the series as well. The Spy has even seen screenshots: it has some very grim-looking men in it, with scars and jerkins, and a really, really dark stronghold that could be Winterfell.

The Spy emailed Craig with promises of a hands-on session at a castle with many turrets, but got a bounceback. "Sorry: in Mexico. Leave me alone." The Spy's Cryptographic Email Truthalyzer confirmed that Pearson was indeed in Mexico and suggested The Spy leave him alone. *Pfft*. A jaunt down the West Coast of America was just what The Spy needed: he had business in San Fran.

The LucasArts compound is always an easy place to crack. This time The Spy disguised himself as George Lucas and wandered around saying he was changing Vader's speech in *The Empire Strikes Back* to: "No, I am your first cousin twice removed." The flurry of activity was the perfect cover. LucasArts is hiring for a lot of positions, and one of the dev's projects includes an "Aerial Combat Title." While it's not space combat, it could be. The Spy dug deeper, but the Wookiee guards *rrrrrrawlll*ed, recognizing his odor and giving chase.

The Spy barely escaped with his disguise intact. Not for the first time The Spy wished he had the powers of Batman. Or maybe Catwoman. The Spy can confirm, as an aside, that there will be feline-based DLC for *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, which will take a more in-depth look at Catwoman's story.

Speaking of slinky, kinky women, The Spy was closing in on Belle. The hotel room graffiti, it turned out, was a map. The Spy copied it and followed the directions to a remote village. The locals told of a fellow so bearded they thought he was a revolutionary, or an art teacher. They pointed to a jungle, and told The Spy to bring swimming shorts.

She was there, with Craig, swimming in a cenote. The water caught the light and illuminated the two of them splashing and giggling. It was too much. They were happy. The Spy picked up Craig's briefcase, left them enough money for a nice holiday together, and left. They were never seen again. Spy out. ■ *The Spy*

The Spy will never fall in love ever again.

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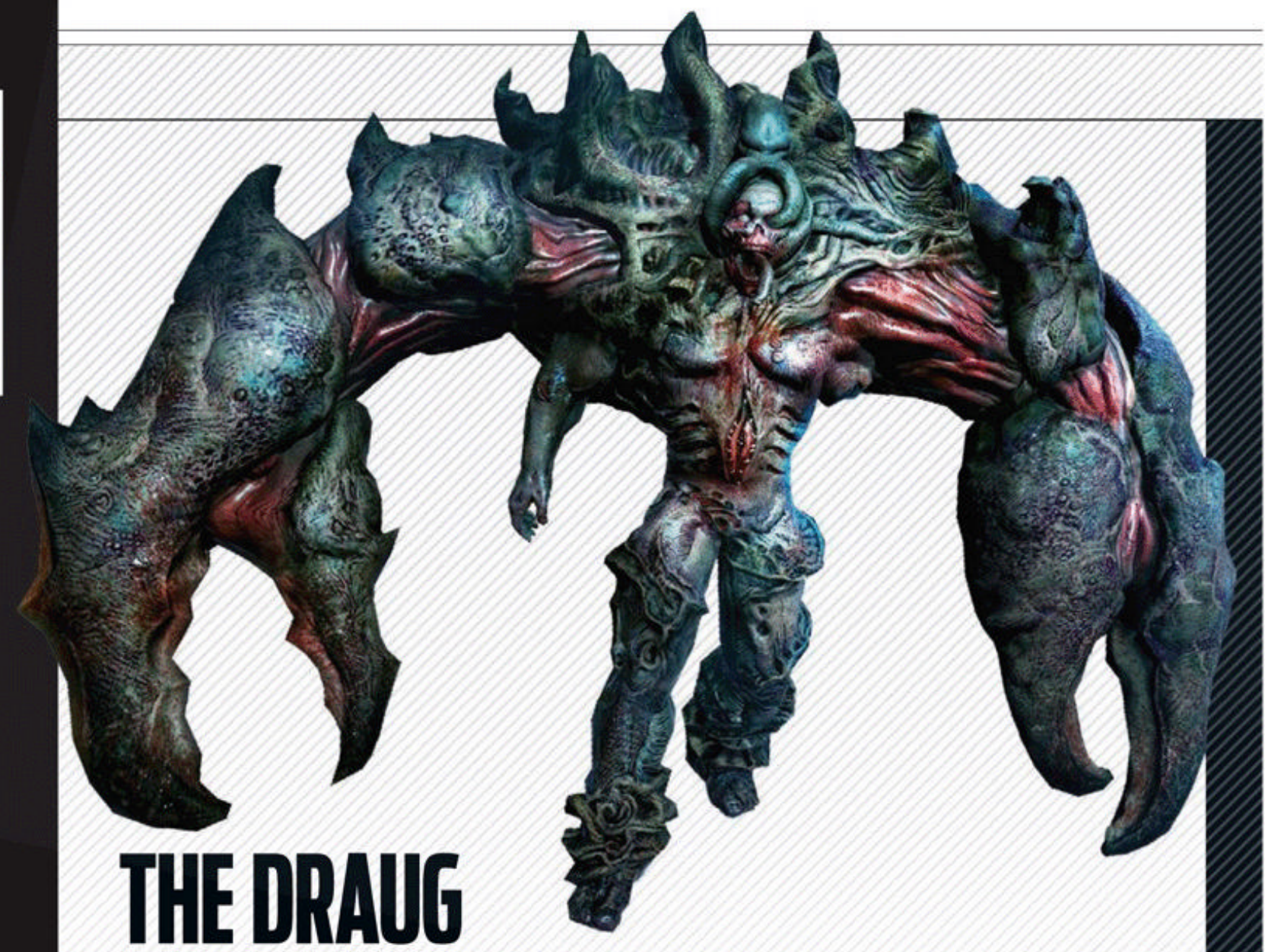
Massive Attack

Bump in the night

Prepare yourself for the horrors that await you in **THE SECRET WORLD**

Your parents lied: monsters don't just exist in fairy tales and myths. They're all around us, hiding in the shadows and underneath the stairs, biding their time before unleashing hell upon the world. It's up to you to keep these horrific creatures at bay, working behind the scenes as part of a secret society to ensure that darkness doesn't overtake civilization. Such is life in *The Secret World*, the modern-day MMO from Funcom that isn't afraid to spook its players.

As a member of the organization of your choosing (the manipulative Illuminati, the chaos-conducting Dragon, or the fanatical Templars), sending these monsters back to oblivion is your number one priority. Our gruesome bestiary is the edge you'll need in your quest to exterminate these paranormal horrors. ■ ***Lucas Sullivan***



THE DRAUG

Birthed by the unholy union of the Filth and the waterlogged bodies of drowned Norse Vikings, these godforsaken creatures exist somewhere between life and death, transformed into coral-encrusted, tentacled monstrosities. Now the Draug use the bodies of their seafaring victims to serve as new soldiers in their army, or as raw organic material to facilitate their pod-based birthing process.

BE WARNED: This boss Draug is intimidating enough on his own, but things only get worse when he summons mind-wiped zombies to fight on his behalf. His gargantuan claws aren't just for show, smacking attackers around or gripping them with bone-splintering force, and his would-be killers better get out of the water when he sends pulses of electricity in an area around him, lest they sizzle to a crisp.

THE AKAB

Like the Lovecraftian abominations of legend, the Akab are beasts not of this earth, or even this reality. Conjured forth by necromancers who hoped to harness them as guardians, they long outlived their masters, and now wander their ancient grounds with no purpose besides exterminating intruders. They can be as small as a dog or as huge as an elephant, but no matter their size, they're most definitely deadly.

BE WARNED: The Akab travel in packs, and you'd be wise to avoid their nests. When they spot you, the Akab will close the gap with a charging tackle. Try to escape, and they'll slow you with a vile goo spewed from their repulsive mandibles.

SCARECROW

The ultimate patchwork monstrosity, a Scarecrow is a being forced into existence with a singular purpose: to kill. Assembled from a stitched-together mess of hay, human entrails, and tattered burlap clothes, this mute golem seeks to terrify more than just crows. Once he's set his sights on you, he won't rest until one of you is dead—but how do you kill that which was never truly alive?

BE WARNED: Scarecrows wield a variety of weapons, but the most brutal is a rusty chainsaw. Your only option may be to turn and face it, perhaps with a chainsaw of your own.

JACK O'LANTERN

The origins of this freakish orange figure are shrouded in mystery, but it's apparent that running into this ghoul in the middle of a pumpkin patch spells certain doom. Time and again, this cackling creature rises from the fresh soil to feed his bloodlust with the changing of the seasons. For the residents of Solomon Island, winter can't come soon enough.

BE WARNED: The Jack O'Lantern likes to hide in pumpkin patches during the harvest, bursting forth from the ground to attack unsuspecting passersby. Instilled with the power of the earth, he can ensnare players with suffocating vines or hurl chunks of dead root.

SPECTRES / WRAITHS

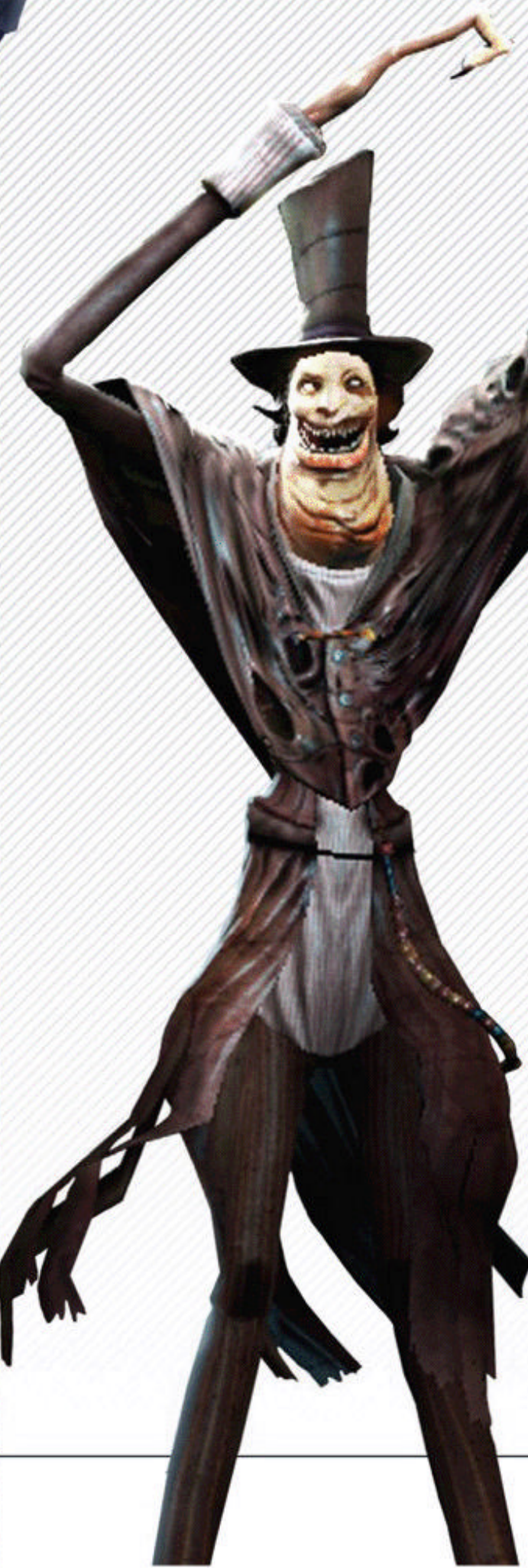
Spectres are the unfortunate victims of brutal and undeserved death, who have—with or without their consent—returned to the corporeal world. Those Spectres with the most hatred for humanity become Wraiths: scythe-wielding ghost lieutenants who orchestrate evil like a maestro conducts a symphony. To face one is akin to staring down the Grim Reaper himself.

BE WARNED: Unlike harmless apparitions, Spectres have terrifying brute strength, which they can use to manipulate objects or rip their prey's head off its shoulders. Able to materialize out of thin air, a Spectre can get the jump on you when you least expect it. Wraiths can use their supremely sharp scythes to rip a shred from the fabric of time itself, letting them warp around during fights in the blink of an eye.

DEEP ONES

Dripping with slime and salt water, the frightful fishmen known as Deep Ones have dwelled in the frigid depths of the Atlantic Ocean for centuries. With the emergence of the Draug, they've been forced to relocate to the shores of New England in search of victims to sate their carnivorous cravings.

BE WARNED: You may be fighting them on land, but they've retained the slippery, agile movements they once used to navigate through the watery deep.



THE FILTH

Those possessed by the pitch-black disease known as the Filth are no ordinary zombies. This foul, dark magic seeps up from below as a noxious liquid or imperceptible radiation, causing hysteria in its victims before mutating them entirely. Be you living, dead, or immortal, no one is safe from the alteration wrought by the Filth.

BE WARNED: Thanks to your anima-imbued powers, you're resistant to the mind-warping powers of the Filth—but that doesn't mean it can't harm you. When Filth-infected enemies die, their vile disease will waft into the air as their corpse erupts into a plume of dark energy, debuffing any who step into it.

BOGEYMAN

This spindly freak is a being of pure evil, living solely to prey on the fears of lost children. He resides in an abandoned amusement park from the '70s that was forced to close after a series of unexplained deaths. Now the Bogeyman lurks through the park's attractions and rides, biding his time until the next unfortunate child crosses his path.

BE WARNED: The Bogeyman won't face you head on. Gathering power from the surrounding rides, which he can manipulate at will, he'll draw you into his own nightmarish realities, using illusions and trickery to gain the upper hand as he taunts you.

Who got their shooter in my space MMO?

STAR TREK ONLINE's new combat update sends Tab targeting packing

by Chris Perry

It's been a rough ride for *Star Trek Online*. Many Trekkies lamented that the space combat lacked some punch, and ground combat felt more like watching paint dry than a space-faring sci-fi adventure. Previous updates have addressed the first problem, and the latest patch offers some exciting new enhancements to ground combat.

The new "shooter" control scheme is simple to enable: either go into the menu and select it from a drop-down, or hit B on the keyboard. A targeting reticule will pop up on your screen, and the camera will switch to over your shoulder, similar to a third-person shooter. Going into shooter mode also changes the way you enable your abilities. The left and right mouse buttons are your main and alternate attack, and the middle button is your melee attack. Just point at your target and use an ability to activate it. No more Tab targeting for you!

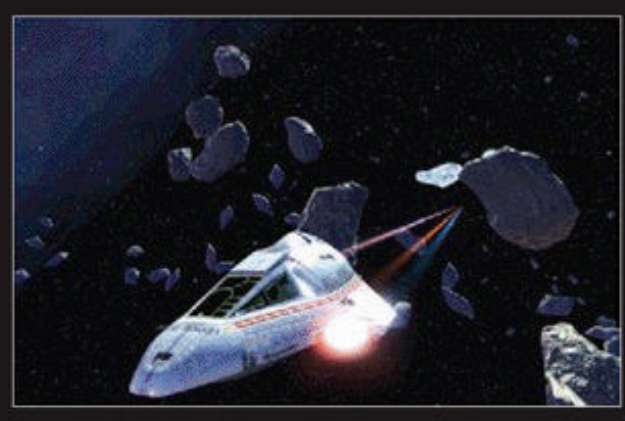
This might seem like a simple change, but it adds a tremendous amount of fun to the ground combat. Running and gunning through Klingon and Romulan outposts seems much more epic when you can dive into a *Max Payne*–style leap across hallways with your dual phaser pistols. Not very *Star Trek*, but a hell of a lot of fun!

While the majority of the game remains very solo player friendly, the end of the game leans heavily on fleets, which are *STO*'s version of guilds. There just isn't as much to do as a solo player when you reach the higher ranks as there is when you're leveling your captain through the earlier portion of the game. Klingon content, a lackluster afterthought at the game's launch, has grown immensely, but it's still not as vast as the Federation content.

But even with the issues at the end of the game and in the Klingon content, I still have fun when I log into *STO*. The changes to ground combat have helped to relieve some of the frustration with those missions, and Featured Episodes make me feel like a character in one of the shows. If you were frustrated with the ground combat, and you wanted some more excitement, then you'll want to jump back in to explore new planets and new civilizations. ■

Yippee ki-yay, mo...

Look, Ma, I'm in a TV episode!



Released as mini-seasons comprised of four to five episodes, the Featured Episodes pit players against a formidable foe and often feature characters from the various *Trek* shows.

Season 1: The Breen (Federation Only)

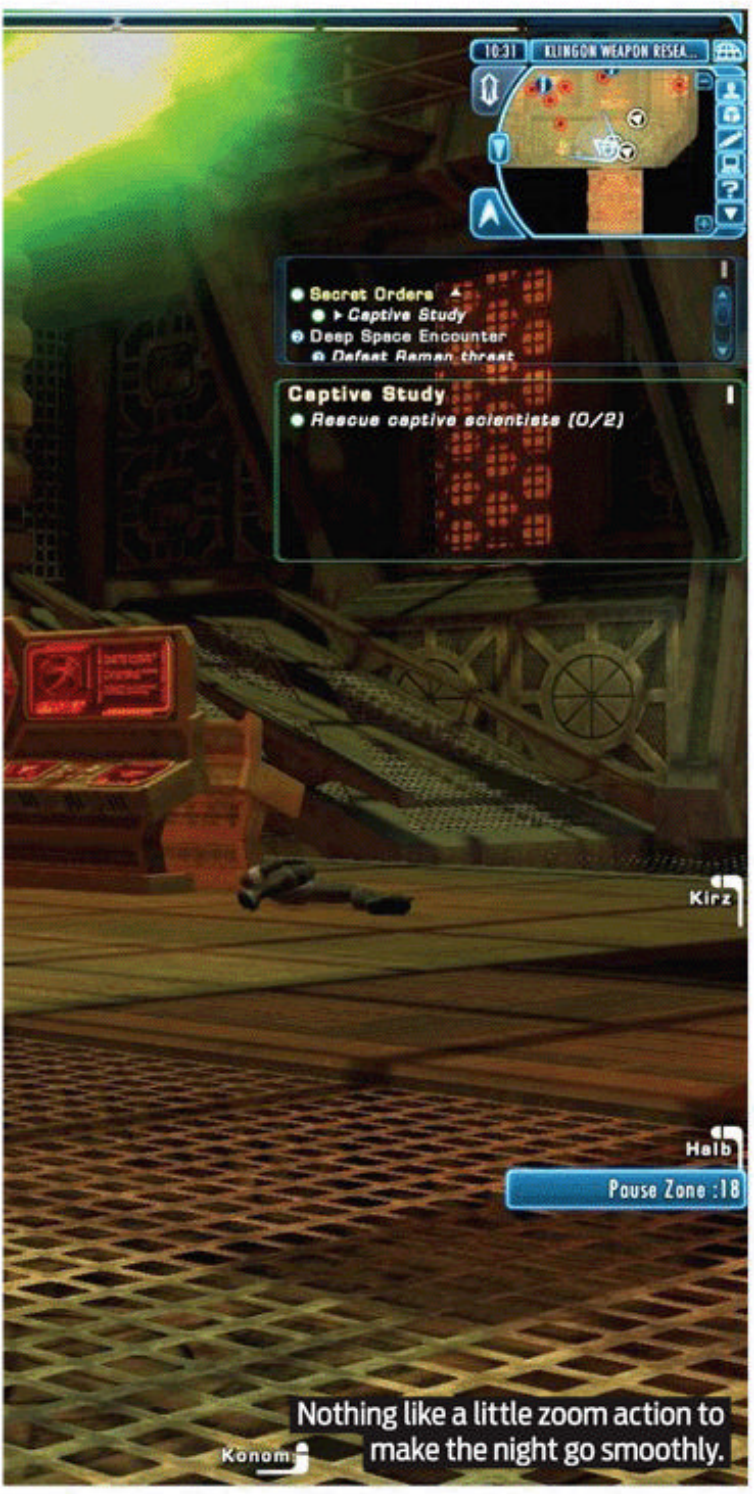
STORY: The Breen are invading a peaceful planet. What ancient secrets could bring them there?
CONTACT: Ambassador Surah, Defera Sector
HIGHLIGHT: Thot Trel's final fight. He hits like a truck.

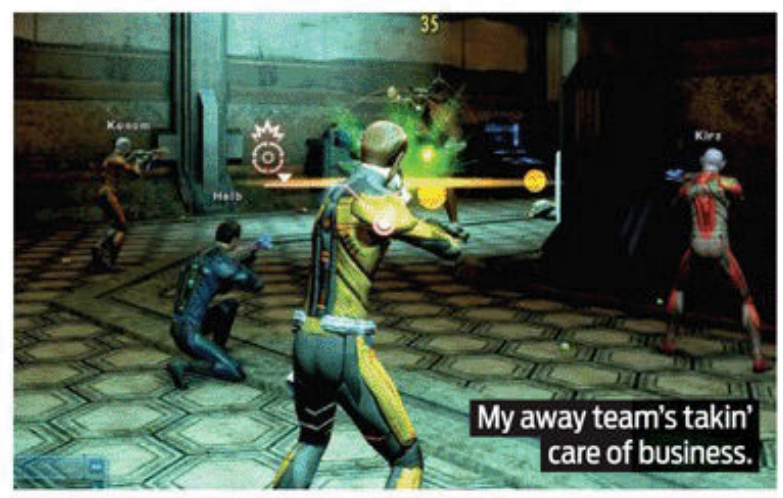
Season 2: The Devidians

STORY: The Devidians are using the chaos of the current fight between the Federation and the Klingons for their own purposes. The fate of the entire quadrant is in your hands!
CONTACT: Federation—Franklin Drake, Eta Eridani Sector Block; Klingon—K'men, Eta Eridani Sector Block
HIGHLIGHT: I wonder what those crazy blue lights are going to do. Episode 5 is still a favorite for many people.

Season 3: Cloaked Intentions

STORY: The Romulans are up to no good, and it's up to you to stop them!
CONTACT: Federation—Admiral T'nea, Alpha Centauri Block; Klingon—Temek, Qo'noS.
HIGHLIGHT: Forcing players to use a shuttle for the first mission is a great idea. Let's have some small ship action inside a Starbase, shall we?





MOBA HERO OF THE MONTH

YMIR

YOUR ENEMIES WILL BE FROZEN IN TERROR AGAINST *SMITE*'S COLD-BLOODED TANK

I've just become the frosty filling of an ice-wall sandwich. Josh and I are getting hands-on time with Hi-Rez Studios' Smite, and we're right at eye-level with the action thanks to the third-person camera angle. Through sheer coincidence, we've both chosen Ymir, the leader of the frost giants from Norse mythology, as the tank of our opposing teams. This astral plane isn't big enough for two ice giants—may be the best frost titan win.

Ymir (pronounced "Eh-meer") has a bevy of abilities that make him more than a damage sponge. Though his melee damage may be low, farming mobs is a breeze thanks to his skill-shot line nuke, impaling puny soldiers on a bed of spiky icicles. Ymir's most crucial spell is a giant ice wall that bursts

through the ground, trapping unsuspecting heroes between your team and a cold place. This gives you the perfect opportunity to freeze them in place with a blast of your bone-chilling breath, totally disabling them as they turn to snow-encrusted statues.

When two Ymirs face off in a 5-on-5 team fight, things really get interesting. Josh is trying to block my escape with a surprise ice wall, and in a panic, I've boxed myself in with an ice wall of my own. Josh sees his chance: activating his ultimate, he gathers his energy to unleash an ice-crystal supernova for huge area-of-effect damage. His team shatters me in an instant, but next time that frosty meathead isn't going to get so lucky. ■

Lucas Sullivan

World of Warplanes

Can Wargaming.net follow up its tanky triumph? *by Tom Hatfield*

World of Tanks was one of this year's great surprises. The name conjured up images of an MMO world where tanks handed out quests, sold gear and killed ten wolves, but what we got was a glorious deathmatch shooter with a deep and complex RPG unlock system. And *World of Warplanes* might seem the next logical step from *World of Tanks*, but it's more than a straight conversion.

"An airplane is more difficult than a tank to control, obviously," acknowledges Victor Kislyi, who's the CEO of Wargaming.net. "There are many more drivers than pilots on this planet. If you look at the cockpit of any plane, you see a lot of controllers. We don't want people to be having to switch on all of those."

Many of the basic concepts are similar to *World of Tanks*. You have a hangar full of different planes and winning battles will earn money and experience to upgrade your planes and unlock new ones. It's a simple system, but an astonishingly compulsive one. When you first get a new vehicle, you start chasing upgrades to make it reach its full potential. But when the vehicle finally gets there, you realize that you're tantalizingly close to acquiring the next vehicle. There's always something new to look forward to.

That effect will be boosted by cross compatibility between the two games. "Let's have mutually acceptable gold, why not?" Kislyi enthuses. There's even the promise that players will be able to move experience points between games.

As in *World of Tanks*, matches are 15 on 15, and you can win by wiping out the enemy. One big difference, however, will be in the alternate win conditions. *World of Tanks* relied on a control point system, which makes little sense in the sky; instead each team will have a ground base that the opposing team needs to take out to win.

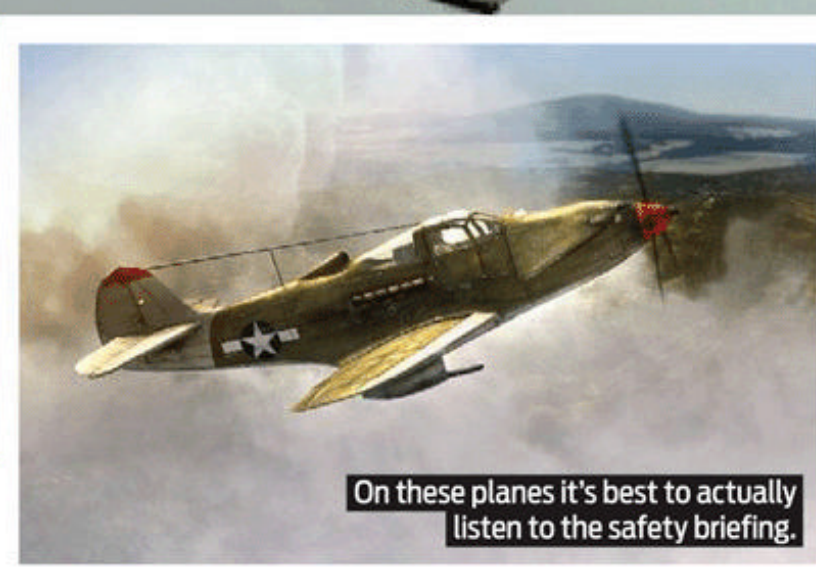
The constant movement of *World of Warplanes* enforces a very different style from most shooters. "[It's] more dynamic, more maneuvers, less camping," Kislyi says. "Airplanes have to be moving all the time, like a shark."

Realistic but fun

The game will launch with US, German, and Soviet planes, with British and Japanese planes to follow in updates. Warplanes will come in three different flavors. Single-engine fighters are the iconic dogfighter—light and quick to turn, they engage enemies closely and destroy them before they can react. Heavy fighters turn more slowly but they hit hard if they catch you head on. Strafing aircraft focus on dealing out damage to ground targets.

Like *World of Tanks*, *World of Warplanes*' roster of planes stretches across either side of World War II. The starting planes will be small 1930s biplanes, while the highest levels will feature early jet planes from the 1950s. "It has to be historically realistic," says Kislyi, "and it has to be well balanced. But the gameplay, the flight mode, and the controls have to be somewhere in the

"Airplanes have to be moving all the time, like a shark."



On these planes it's best to actually listen to the safety briefing.

Where's Biggles when you need him, eh?

There are no takeoffs or landings to trouble those lacking full pilot training.

Warplanes is more than a straight conversion of *World of Tanks*.

Tsk, a flagrant disregard for smoking bans.

There are three styles of aircraft to choose from.

There's some blue(ish) sky thinking right there.

middle so that normal people can play."

It's clear the development team has a passion for military history, but it isn't afraid to fudge things in the name of fun and balance. For example, *World of Warplanes* will be removing takeoffs and landings, the most frustrating and disaster-ridden part of any flight sim game. Instead, players will get dropped straight into the world, ready to dogfight. Wargaming.net is currently debating whether to let players try to land their planes at the end of the match for an experience bonus.

As with *World of Tanks*, the controls will be as simple as the developers can make them, but complex calculations underneath will determine the success of every shot. Hardcore flight sim fans will be free to use a joystick if they want, but it won't be necessary to play the game effectively.

Aiming higher

Wargaming.net has invested most of its revenues from *World of Tanks* back into the company "We don't drive Ferraris," says Kislyi. "The money goes back into new jobs, so we are upping the position of the game as we speak."

Lessons have been learned from the first game, too. The number of people playing *World of Tanks* caught Wargaming.net by surprise, forcing a long beta period. Kislyi assures us they're trying for a shorter turnover with the *World of Warplanes* beta, which should start this December. There are technological improvements as well, with BigWorld assisting on an upgraded version of the *World of Tanks* engine to launch with the game.

Sadly, planes and tanks won't get to fight alongside each other in the same arena. According to Kislyi, the playstyles are just too different, not to mention the fact that *World of Warplanes*' maps are significantly larger than any of those seen in *World of Tanks*. Instead, the Clan Wars metagame, in which rival guilds battle for territory over a turn-based map, will link the two titles. Planes will fight for air superiority of a region while tanks attempt to control the ground, success in both counting towards your larger goals.

The company also announced *World of Battleships* early this fall. It's being developed in tandem with *World of Warplanes*, but it's taking a very different approach: bigger, slower, and more powerful guns.

So how much further can the *World of* series go? "Even a six-year-old boy can come up with a list of obvious continuations," says Kislyi. "Of course battleships, of course helicopters, of course warplanes, of course modern jet planes, of course big walking robots," he says. "It's not about having the ideas—everyone has those ideas. The key is to find the appropriate development team, put a lot of money in so the game is quality, and then wrap it up in community and support layers to service it right. Any of those games are possible and would be a success if they're done right."

So could we see *World of Mechs*? Kislyi just laughs. ■

You've been HACKED!

This isn't time to panic—this is war! Lace up your boots and follow these orders to get your stuff back ***by Candace McCarty***

1. SEND UP THE FLARE

1. Don't panic and don't rage.
2. Resist the temptation to immediately log into the game or reset any passwords yet.
3. Call or email the game's customer service and nicely inform them that your account's been compromised, and ask them to lock it down while you try to restore the security on your computer.

Customer service phone numbers

Blizzard: 1-800-59-BLIZZARD
Trion: 1-877-70-TRION
NCsoft: 1-512-225-6359
EA: 1-866-543-5435
SOE: 1-858-537-0898
Turbine: 1-781-407-4020

2. SEARCH AND DESTROY

1. Immediately back up all of your important files.
2. Scrub your computer with your preferred virus-scanning and malware-scanning software. You can't be too thorough when it comes to security.

Free programs you can use
AVG free virus scanner: www.free.avg.com
Malwarebytes: www.malwarebytes.org
Spybot Search and Destroy: www.safer-networking.org

3. If the keylogger/virus/evil-little-bugger is particularly malicious or stubborn, you may need to format your hard drive as a last resort.

DO'S

Do make complex, creative passwords
Do use auto-login to thwart keyloggers
Do keep your antivirus software up to date
Do check all email links before clicking them
Do report any suspicious emails

DON'TS

Don't make all your passwords the same
Don't buy from gold sellers
Don't solicit a power-leveling service
Don't go to sketchy websites
Don't share your account information with anyone

3. REPORT YOUR WOES

1. Once your computer is clean, you're ready to safely regain control of your account. Call back customer support and let them know.
2. Have your verification information ready when you call. Don't forget your mother's maiden name!
3. Explain exactly what happened and, if you have access to your account, what was stolen. If you don't have access, you can follow up with them about what was stolen from you afterward.
4. Be calm and collected. Remember, the friendly people on the phone didn't steal your stuff.

4. BARRICADE THE DOORS

1. Assume that all of your passwords/logins were compromised, and change 'em all.
2. Let your buddies know what happened. Repair friendships destroyed when they saw your toon naked in the city streets shouting about "l33t GoLd SALz" and see if they'll help you get caught up with donations or dungeon runs.
3. Game on! (And do try to be more careful this time, OK?)

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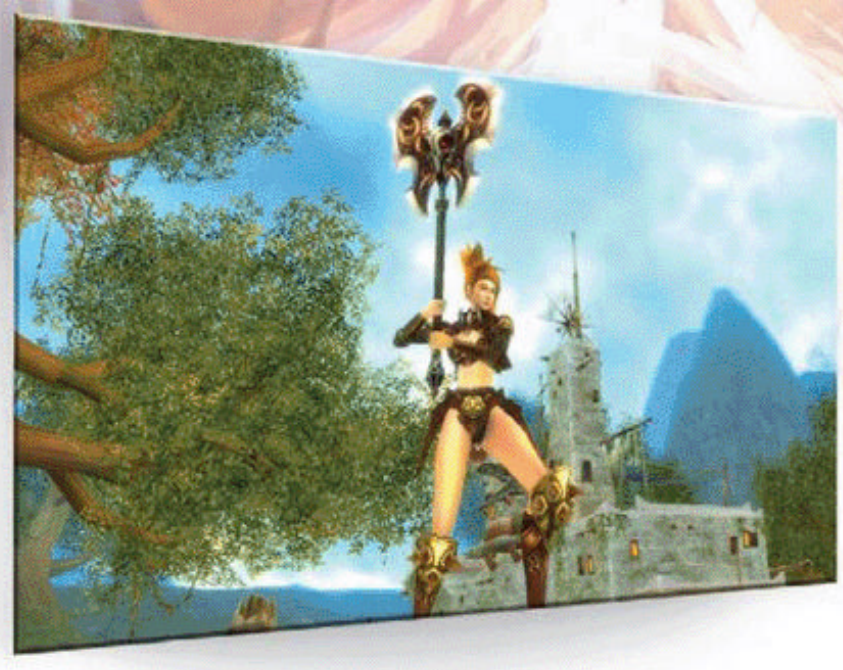
Not Your Average Mage



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All for one and one for all

When politics and online worlds collide *by Gavin Townsley*

If you feel like you're not getting enough politics from your everyday life, never fear—several virtual worlds out there offer plenty of opportunity for you to practice your campaigning and scheming. Here's a closer look at political systems for three of them.

TERA's customized leadership

Politics in *TERA* are all about power and control: every 21 days potential leaders face off for control of one of 18 regions and the title of Vanarch. *TERA*'s campaign process is full of pleasant political features and I have to use each and every one of them to secure my rule.

Where's that free *TERA*-themed candy I was promised?

One of my favorite features in *TERA* is the ability to customize how I campaign. I decided to take on the role of an oppressive overlord, filling in my personal campaign page with a customized *PC Gamer* emblem and my own motto: Free candy for all noobs! My path to dictatorship had begun. If I wanted to broaden my campaign's reach, I could set up a Facebook page or website that could be linked from my political outline. For those who prefer a more hands-on approach, some regions allow you to beat your subjects into submission by attaining the top position in guild-on-guild PvP.

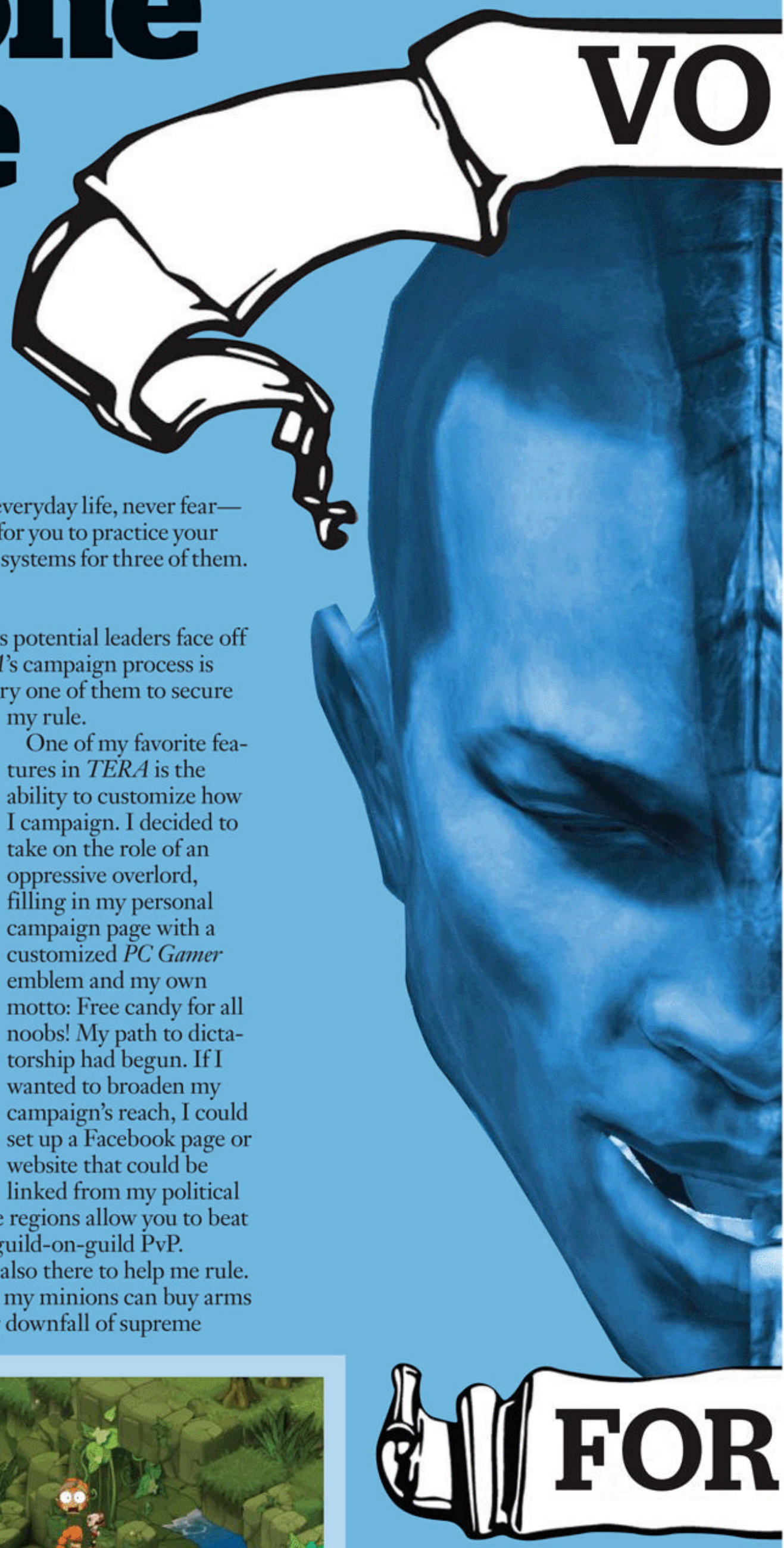
The customization isn't just there to help me get elected; it's also there to help me rule. As Vanarch, I can choose how my region works, from whether my minions can buy arms and supplies to how much these services will be taxed. The big downfall of supreme power? Being a dictator is extremely expensive and will almost certainly cement your failure in the next election.

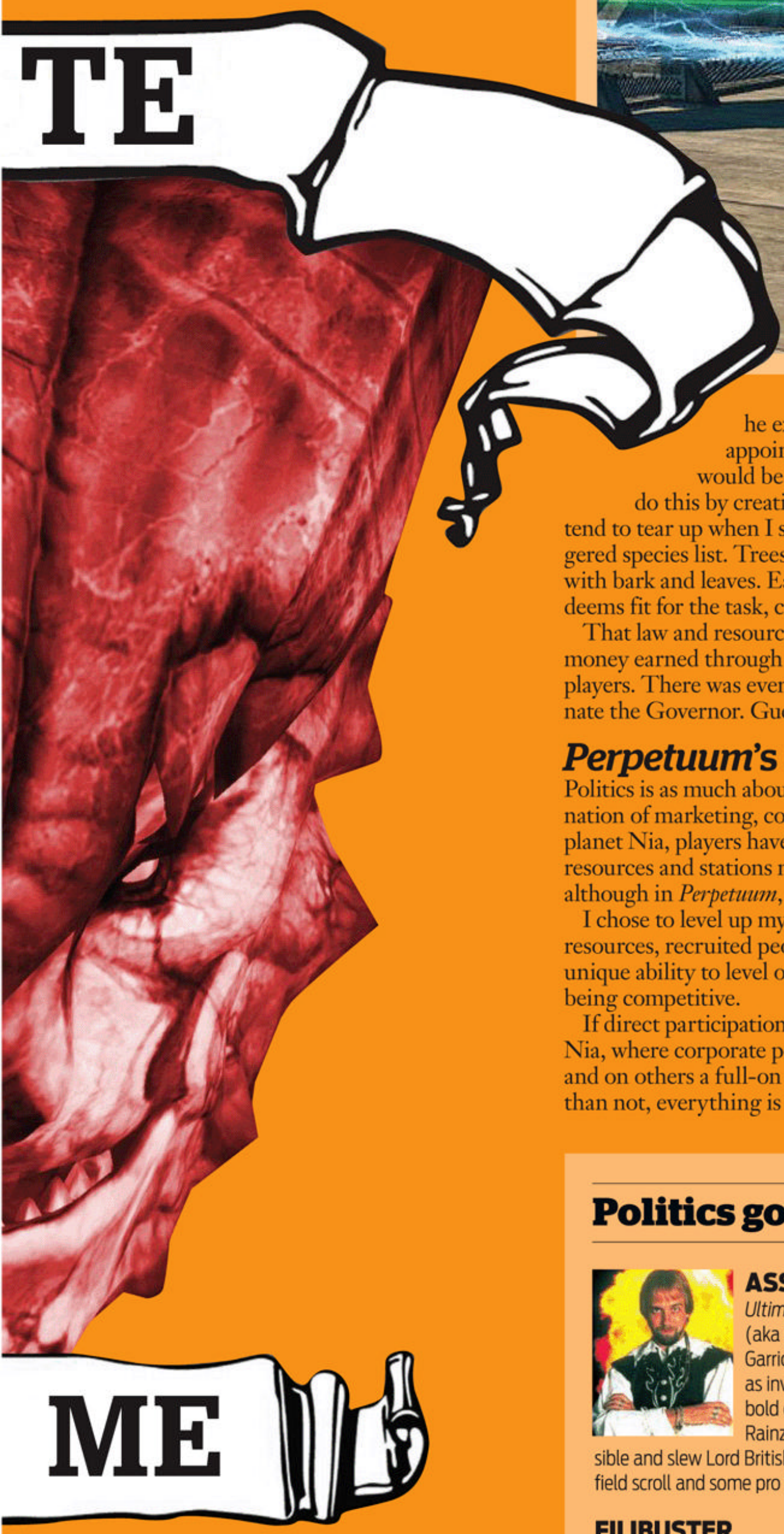
Wakfu's balancing act

Wakfu may sound like an inferior martial art, but it's really a cute anime-inspired gem with one of the best law-based political systems I've played.

I followed the current Governor (*Wakfu*'s top elected office) around as

Raise my *Wakfu* taxes? Eek!





Taking your resources one bad-ass laser at a time in *Perpetuum*.

he explained that everything is about balance. For instance, he appointed me to serve as his Ecologist and informed me that my duties would be to maintain the balance of resources for all his land. I was able to do this by creating laws around which animals and plants could be harvested. I tend to tear up when I see the delightfully cute Tofus die, so they were put on the endangered species list. Trees are not as huggable and it was now open season on anything with bark and leaves. Each of seven jobs, filled by whomever the elected Governor deems fit for the task, can set these laws to help encourage balance in the world.

That law and resource-based structure bleeds into most aspects of the game. Tax money earned through sales and questing helped purchase region-specific buffs for all players. There was even a law that would take my citizen points down if I tried to assassinate the Governor. Guess I'll have to slay him on the campaign trail.

Perpetuum's optional ease

Politics is as much about warfare as it is elections, and *Perpetuum*'s politics are a combination of marketing, company management, and all-out laser-on-missile action. On the planet Nia, players have the choice to battle for certain areas that contain valuable resources and stations needed for commerce. It's a similar system to that of *EVE Online*, although in *Perpetuum*, participation is optional.

I chose to level up my humble corporation outside of the line of fire. I gathered resources, recruited people, and had my industrial bot churning in the profits. The unique ability to level outside of PvP areas gave my corporation a shot at eventually being competitive.

If direct participation is more your thing, it's as simple as relocating to the next zone of Nia, where corporate politics burst out in full heat. On some days it's a little skirmish, and on others a full-on war, but the battle is always more intense because more often than not, everything is riding on who kills whom. ■

Politics gone bad

ASSASSINATION

Ultima Online's Lord British (aka game creator Richard Garriott) was always seen as invincible. However, one bold character named Rainz pulled off the impossible and slew Lord British with a simple fire field scroll and some pro thieving skills.

FILIBUSTER

World of Warcraft guild The Imperial Order rushed to attain the scepter for opening Ahn-Qiraj on the Detheroc server. However, when the time came to unlock the gates they refused, idling until people paid the sum of gold they wanted.

FRAUD

EVE Online has been host to several market-based disasters, including Ponzi schemes. One such venture shut down suddenly after more than 4,000 players bought in. The scheme's perpetrators stole 1,034 billion isk, which amounts to more than $50,000 dollars worth of 30-day time cards. Ouch.

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TALKING DEV MAN

Jeff Green wrote about PC games for 12 years at *PC Gamer*'s archrival magazine, now defunct. He's still bitter. Now he works at PopCap as Director of Editorial and Social Media. And no, he doesn't know what that means either. He can be found ranting on Twitter as @Greenspeak.

You've just started playing a new game. For a brief moment, you've forgotten your troubles, your homework, the economic crisis, and the sad fact that sometime within the next 100 years you are going to be dead. Everything's awesome! And then suddenly you hit a spot that strikes you as the most idiotic thing you've ever seen.

"Wait, seriously?" you yell at your monitor. "I have to backtrack through the entire level just to get a stun gun to beat this guy? Didn't these devs even play their own game?"

What I'm here to tell you is this: Yes, they did play their own game. And I guarantee you that someone on the team had the exact problem as you and brought it up in a meeting. Maybe 30 people brought it up. Maybe the entire team agreed. But the sad truth? There was probably not a dang thing they could have done about it.

Even on a well-managed team, there are simply too many moving parts, all dependent on one another, for things to go right all the time, or even half the time. And unless you're the rare company like Blizzard or Valve, with the luxury to ship "when you're ready," development is a zero-sum game. You can't accommodate or perfect or even fix what's broken in a game without it impacting something else.

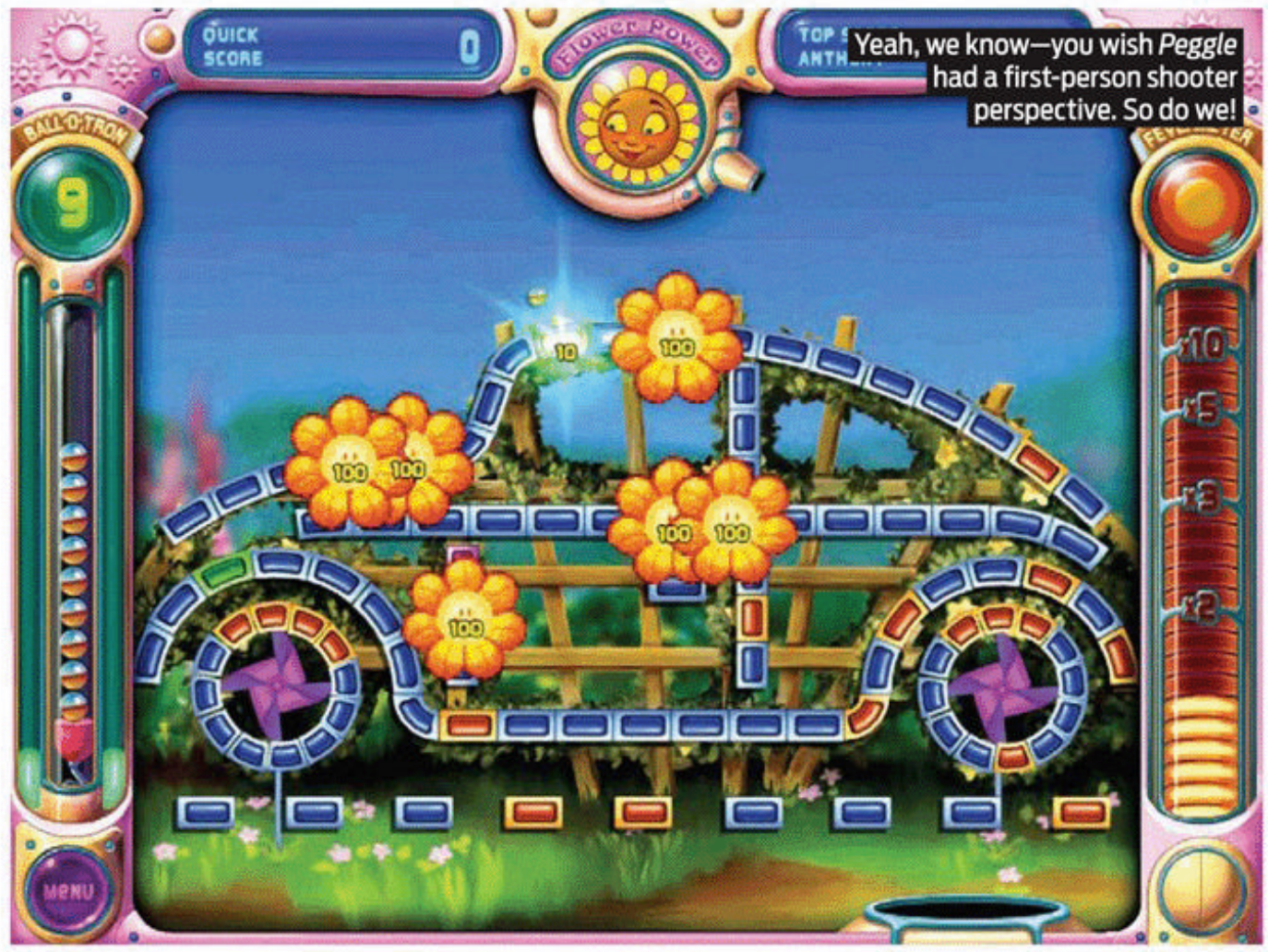
Too big not to fail

Here's one tiny example. One day I wrote a couple lines of dialog and then went to lunch. When I returned, I discovered that because I'd failed to save correctly, I'd broken the entire game and halted 60 people's progress. The result of *that* was that an engineer, who could have been perfecting one of the game's lame-looking animations, had to fix my mistake. The next day he was pulled away for something else. And so the following week, when he was finally able to fix that lame animation, he was unavailable to the designers, who had a great new idea for a puzzle, but couldn't ensure it would work without his help, except now he had no time because he'd fallen behind because of my mistake a week earlier, and so the puzzle was cut.

Every day is like this. Every game is a gargantuan, hulking, creaking monstrosity of code, teetering along in its development, ready to be wrecked by any number of obstacles, from an artist's broken stylus to a momentary server outage to an engineer eating an old burrito and getting food poisoning. As a developer, you see things you want to fix, things that could make the game better, or even functional, but you can't do it.

> **"Developers not drunk on their own Kool-Aid know what's coming."**

You start cutting your losses, not because you don't care about the game, but because you have no choice. The game has to come out that quarter, because shareholders are expecting it, because your company's entire fiscal plan counts on it, and because this is a business, whether you like it or not, and (in the short term at least) a timely broken product trumps a late, perfected product. So, against your own judgment, you swallow your pride. You plan for patches. You pray the critics and gamers won't notice.



Of course, none of this matters at all as far as gamers are concerned. Nor should it. All that matters, to gamers, is what they paid for: the game that's in the box. The secret truth is that when the critics and gamers *do* start bitching, the developers not drunk on their own Kool-Aid already know what's coming. They know better than anyone just what their game could have been, and they also know what it isn't. And the developers who don't know this? They'll never make a good game anyway, no matter how much time and money you give them. ■

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TACTICAL ADVANTAGE

A PC upgrade can make everything feel new again, even something as minor as using Microsoft Word. I'm giddy at how much information my new 27-inch monitor can display. With enough desktop space to write in one window while others show me sources and chats with editors, I feel like the world is at my fingertips.

I wish strategy games gave me that feeling more often, since they actually *do* put a world at my fingertips. Too often, strategy developers take the wrong approach to visual design and misplace their priorities when it comes to graphics.

Take a game like *Combat Mission: Battle for Normandy*, where developer Battlefront.com clearly poured considerable effort into their detailed models—you can literally count the rivets on a German Panther tank. But details like this don't show me what I need to see: elevation changes, patches of dense foliage, and which units are in trouble. *Combat Mission* tries to offer wargamers some eye candy, but it leaves them starved for the kind of information that could streamline play. That's a recipe for recurring frustration in a game with so many moving parts, where battles can turn on the smallest of details.

Give me the highlights

The master of excellent visual design is, of course, Relic. Most strategy games can't approach the beauty (or budget) of games like *Company of Heroes* and *Dawn of War II*, but it's not the polygon counts that make Relic's visuals so great. It's how much they communicate, even resorting to comic-book touches like a "!" over the heads of broken troops, or a flashy overlay showing that someone just tossed a grenade. Troops fight with distinguishable weapons and expressive animations that broadcast what each unit does and how it's faring. Before I even glance at the info panel, I have tremendous situational awareness.

Not every developer has such a fine understanding of what players need to see, much less how to show it to them. Paradox, in particular, has struggled with visuals in games like *Victoria II* and *Sengoku*, where looking at a map doesn't show what's actually happening. Take *Sengoku*, a game of dynasty building in feudal Japan: three-quarters of the screen are given over to a map, but the real battlefield is one of family ties and feudal obligations. Territory is just a way of keeping score, yet the map dominates the display while crucial information is confined to a series of cramped, unhelpful windows. In a game all about lineage and lieges, *Sengoku* doesn't include a single family tree, nor an easy way to see who owns what on the main map.

Strategy developers need to think holistically about visual design. Art and animations aren't eye candy—they're the thousand words that will do the heavy lifting for the interface. When my girlfriend asked what was going on in my *Tropico 4* game, I was able to take her on a tour of my island and explain to her exactly what was happening and why. Visuals told most of the story. Here was a crowd around a protester, and over there was a packed beachfront restaurant. In a few places, I would open a window just to show her a little more detail, like why the protester was angry, or why my tourist town was doing so well.

During a tense battle for succession within *Sengoku*'s Clan Shimazu, my girlfriend brought me up short by asking the same question. I looked at the screen, but there was nothing that could illustrate my situation. Like many strategy games, *Sengoku* relies on spreadsheets, vague icons, and a plethora of map overlays to communicate fragments of information. The player's job is to assemble those data shards into a picture of what's happening. This leads to one of the greatest frustrations for a strategy gamer: the knowledge that no matter what you're looking at, there's probably something else you need to see. ■

> **"Art and animations aren't eye candy—they're 1,000 words."**

Panzer Corps displays enough information that you rarely need to open a menu or check a stat sheet.

Rob Zacny hosts the podcast Three Moves Ahead, and spent this month grinding away at *Age of Empires Online* and playing *Sengoku* and *Tropico 4*. Email him at tacticaladvantage@pcgamer.com.

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IN SIMULATION

Andy Mahood kept the front lines clear this month with *DCS: A-10C Warthog, Flaming Cliffs 2.0, DCS: Black Shark, IL-2 Sturmovik: Cliffs of Dover,* and *Rise of Flight.* Email him at insimulation@pcgamer.com.

"Always use the right tool for the job."

Sage advice from my father many years ago, but his words rang especially true this past month when I finally got my paws on Thrustmaster's latest HOTAS Warthog A-10C flightstick and throttle.

Weighing in at almost 15 pounds, the mostly metal HOTAS Warthog is the Rolls Royce of Hands-On-Throttle-And-Stick controllers for current-generation flight sims. It ain't cheap (the best online price I could find was $350), but if you're serious about your virtual combat flying, it's one of the best investments you can make.

The natural successor to Thrustmaster's decade-old all-steel F-16 replica HOTAS Cougar, the HOTAS Warthog improves on its forebearer by using 3D magnetic sensors rather than potentiometers (which notoriously wore out under heavy use with the Cougar). The flightstick—which feels so solid and responsive you'll never want to go back to plastic—features an eight-way point-of-view hat, three four-way hats, a dual-stage trigger, and four push buttons including a removable paddle switch (for A-10C realism zealots who don't want this F-16 feature on their Hogs).

The throttle body is similarly impressive. Crafted from mostly steel components, the weighted base incorporates an impressive array of LED-illuminated buttons and military-quality switches that emulate the exact throw and resistance of the real thing (Thrustmaster purportedly even measured the "volume" of each switch click for additional authenticity). Friction resistance on the split throttle is easily adjustable and, in keeping with the "hands-on" principle of the original USAF design, incorporates a mouse hat with push button, an eight-way POV hat, a four-way hat, and assorted three-position switches. You can lock the throttles together for synchronized operation, and there are also lift and push/pull detents for the idle and afterburner ranges.

The greatest of ease

For all of its apparent complexity, the HOTAS Warthog is plug-and-play from the get-go. There's no disc to install, and you can be up and running in minutes once you connect it to the USB ports on your PC. Picking the first test sim was a no-brainer: I fired up Eagle Dynamics' *DCS: A-10C Warthog* for its maiden flight with the new controller. I was thrilled to discover that the simulation auto-detected the device and delivered a preset configuration of button presses and axis assignments that worked perfectly without any tailoring or adjustments on my part.

The Warthog doesn't ship with rudder pedals, so I had to draft a set of CH Products Pro-Pedals into service, but once I had my plane airborne, I was flying more efficiently than ever before. With its 16-bit axis resolution, the controller delivered surgical stick and throttle response and it was a treat having most of my significant commands—weapons, flaps, speed brakes, targeting slew control—within fingertip range. You'll feel like a USAF pilot after an hour with this product.

> "You'll feel like a USAF pilot after an hour with this."

Making the HOTAS work with other modern flight sims (such as *Flaming Cliffs 2*, *Black Shark*, *Rise of Flight*, and *IL-2 Sturmovik: Cliffs of Dover)* took a little more effort, as they typically only detect the control axes and a few buttons. However, you can download a software client from Thrustmaster called TARGET that offers additional presets and virtually limitless configurability. Once I'd gotten all the various specifications set up to my liking, I developed an entirely new appreciation for these sims, especially the non-historical ones where button-festooned HOTAS cockpits are the order of the day.

I still struggle occasionally with the nuances of rotary-wing flight in *DCS: Black Shark*, but I'm enjoying the hell out of *DCS: A-10C* and *Flaming Cliffs 2* right now and anticipate exhaustively honing my skills in the weeks and months ahead.

Having the right tool for the job really makes a helluva difference. ■

Fly by the tips of your fingers with Thrustmaster's HOTAS Warthog.

ALTERNATE LIVES

In early RPGs, exchanges with NPCs generally consisted of being told where to go to dispatch the evil wizard mastermind. Thataway, Avatar. These days, however, NPCs have become downright loquacious, and you're just as likely to hear characters spout deep philosophical musings or attempt to seduce you as you are to get quest directions. BioWare's RPGs, in particular, have effectively evolved into interactive novels that feature some first-rate writing and storytelling.

But I'm still skeptical of the merits of actual books based upon gaming franchises. In fact, resolutely avoiding all books (or movies) based upon gaming franchises is a prudent rule to maintain, since they're consistently awful. But the *Witcher* books by Andrzej Sapkowski don't really fall into that category, since the novels spawned the games. I really loved the first *Witcher* book, *The Last Wish*. Geralt is a fantastic protagonist and the book introduces several characters that are important to the game, including the cursed princess Adda, companion bard Dandelion, and the elves Chireadan and Toruviel. Prior knowledge of character history might actually influence your gaming decisions—you'd probably be less inclined to side with Toruviel, for instance, if you knew that she previously tried to bash your head.

> **Books based on gaming franchises are consistently awful.**

Unfortunately, the rest of the *Witcher* books are hard to recommend unless you can read them in Polish, German, or Russian. The second book hasn't been translated into English, and though the third book, *Blood of Elves*, has, it forms part of a larger story that may never be entirely translated.

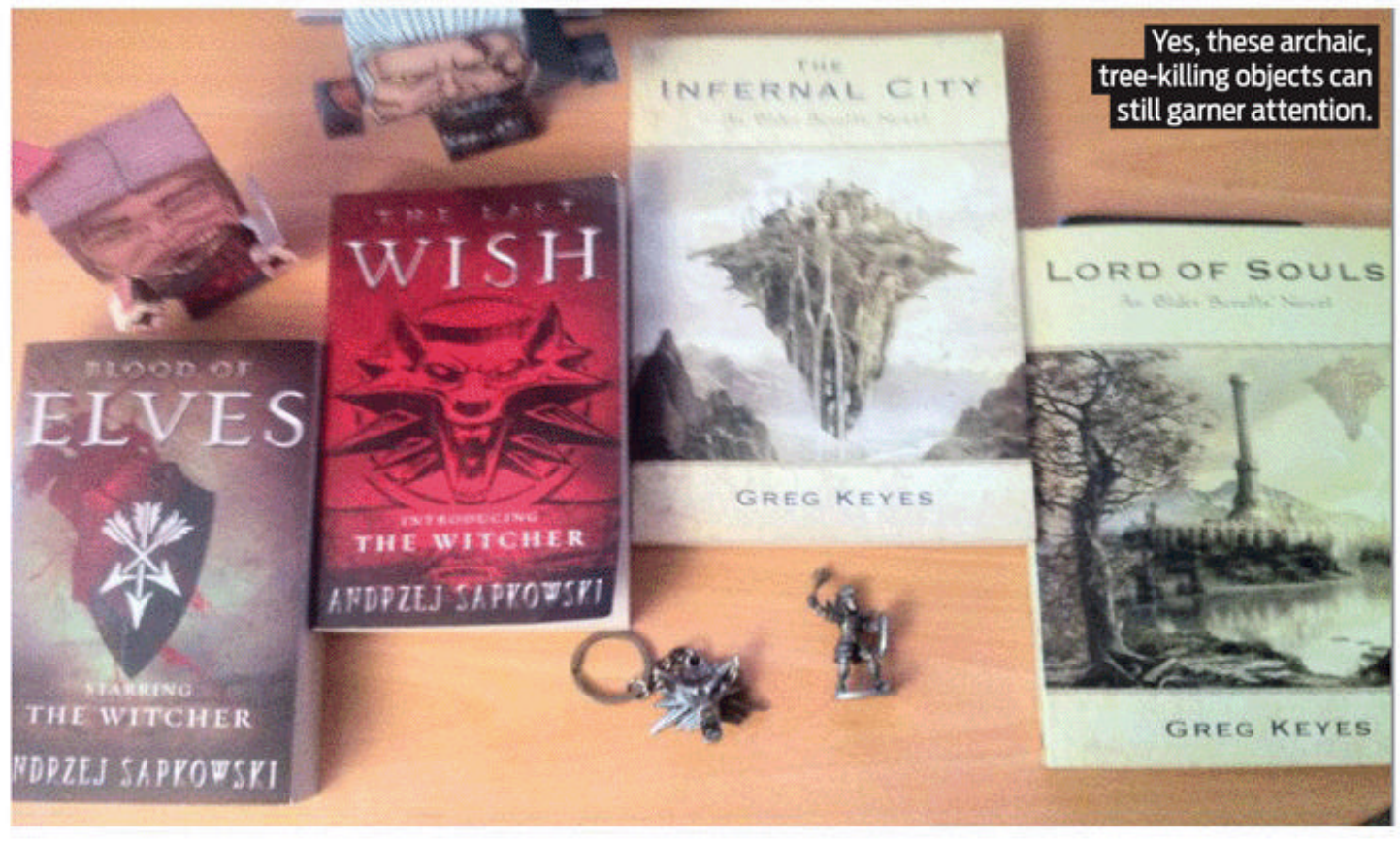
In anticipation of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, I decided to take a chance on the spinoff books written by Greg Keyes.

Filling in the gaps

I can happily report that the books don't read like the schlocky fan-fiction I was dreading, but the writing is not of Sapkowki's caliber, and the novels only vaguely describe notable events in Tamriel since *Oblivion*. They also only bridge the first 40 years of post-*Oblivion* events, while *Skyrim* is set 200 years after *Oblivion*. But a lot happened to Tamriel. The Empire collapsed and was partly reestablished by a new family line. Morrowind was devastated by a massive volcanic eruption and then conquered by the Argonians, who established their independence. The Kjajiit of Elsweyr seceded from the Empire, as did the Wood Elves and High Elves, who reestablished the Aldmeri Dominion. The old guild system collapsed, giving rise to cryptic bands like the College of Whispers and The Synod.

The books only teasingly refer to those events, and instead focus on the threat of Umbriel, a self-contained, floating city that feeds off souls and creates an army of undead from its victims. The tone of the books sometimes seems juvenile, and several of the characters are very young and naive, but Keyes also throws in some awkward sex scenes and surprising deaths. Much of the "action" in the books takes place in a kitchen—actually, several kitchens—yet the books manage to overcome that bizarre narrative choice and be reasonably entertaining, particularly when they feature iconic characters from the games, including several Daedric Lords. Alchemy receives considerable focus, which seems appropriate given the emphasis harvesting reagents has in the games, and each of Tamriel's unique races gets at least a few moments to shine.

If you're only tempted to read the books to learn what's happened in Tamriel since *Oblivion*, they're not worthwhile, and *The Last Wish* is better written and less padded if you're just looking for a fantasy novel. But as someone who loves the lore of Tamriel, and actually reads the books within the games, the novels were a satisfying appetizer before *Skyrim*. ■



Yes, these archaic, tree-killing objects can still garner attention.

Desslock is looking for scrolls in *The Witcher 2* and *Mass Effect 2*, after recently exhausting all literature in *The Witcher* and *Mass Effect*.

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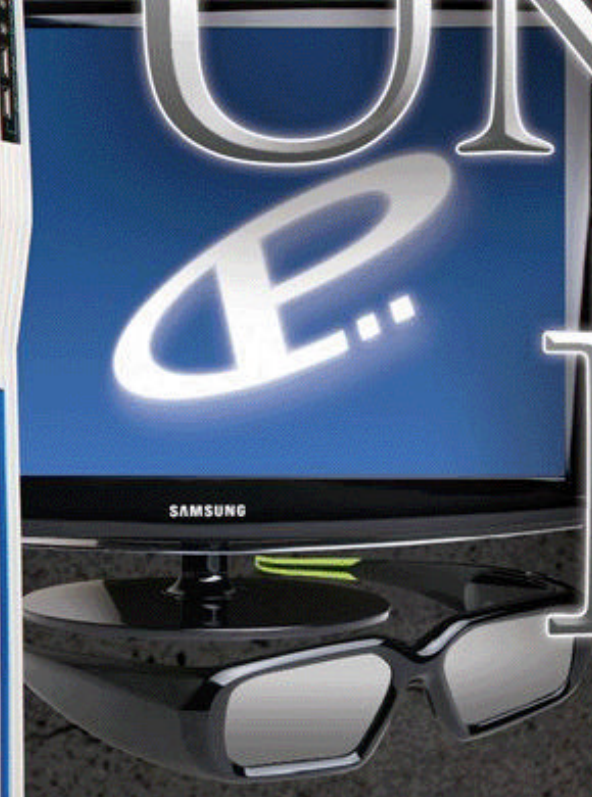

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"Hi, my name is Kilo, I'll be your ruthless killer-for-hire tonight..."

SYNDICATE

FIRST LOOK Stupid corporations, being all corporate

Syndicate—like its top-down, squad-based predecessor—imagines a future war between merciless corporations, fought by hyper-trained and utterly amoral killers. In *Syndicate*, these corporations are sinister and faceless business octopi, with tentacles in every industrial pie. They're the world's largest and most influential companies. Were this real life, the player would probably be a killer-for-hire working for a 2069 version of Apple.

Like any videogame protagonist worth his salt, *Syndicate*'s main character has a suite of abilities suited to murdering other people. His name is Miles Kilo, and he works for the mysteriously bland-sounding Eurocorp Syndicate. Developers Starbreeze hasn't said what Eurocorp sells yet, but they *do* put their names on guns. Any company happy to plaster its name on the side of a rifle can't be too friendly.

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER Starbreeze
LINK www.ea.com/syndicate

Miles can use these guns to insert bullets into the heads of people, but that's the boring approach—he's got a better option already jammed inside his own skull. The Dart 6 chip is standard issue for the wealthy half of humanity, and it acts as a little PC inside the head of users. Sounds ideal, I know, but the chip's not just there to let you close your eyes and play *Minecraft* on the train: it actively informs buying habits and produces consumers. Syndicates control the stream of information into the chipped-up person's head, and Eurocorp want to wrest majority control away from its competitors to make people buy more of its socks (or whatever it is the company sells).

Syndicate's main character Miles Kilo has a suite of abilities suited to murdering people.

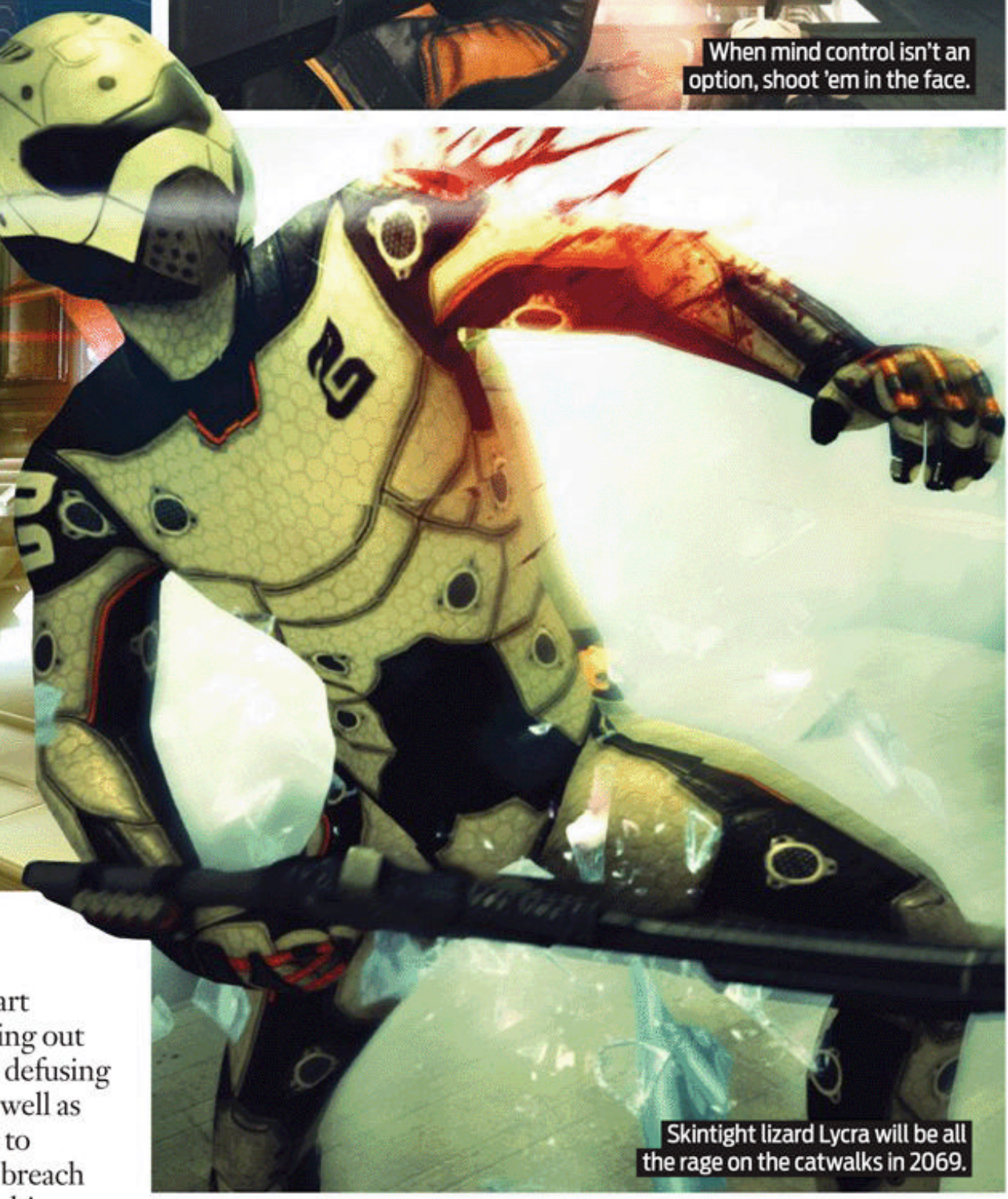
Kilo's Dart 6 chip is weapons-grade, and a step above the chips of 2069's anti-Eurocorpers. Point at an enemy, activate your chip, and you get to see *Syndicate*'s trump card: "breaching." Miles hacks into his opponent's chip, and once he's let himself inside that person's brain, he has a number of nasty options.

Select the "suicide" option, and you'll be able to enjoy the grisly spectacle of your chosen foe putting his weapon against the roof of his mouth and sending his brains all over a back wall. Select "backfire," and you'll overload his weapon, toasting his fingers and sending his nearby pals to the floor with the resulting explosion. Go for "allegiance," and you'll make a temporary mind-pact with your target, letting him focus his gun on his friends to take them out before turning the gun around and shooting himself in the head.

Dart Vision—infinitely better than ChuckleVision.

When mind control isn't an option, shoot 'em in the face.

Did we mention that Kilo's gun can shoot around corners? Drool.


Skintight lizard Lycra will be all the rage on the catwalks in 2069.

The future is now

Somewhat fortunately for the sake of our humanity, players can't just run around forcefully suggesting people kill themselves, cackling as they do. Dart powers take time to recharge, but they can also be upgraded in power. How do you upgrade? In typically gruesome *Syndicate* style: by reaching into the gooey heads of your fallen foes, pulling out their implanted circuitry, and jamming it into your ear.

Your Dart chip's power over the world extends to inanimate objects. Get your timing right, and you can hack grenades as they sail toward you, leaving them to clatter harmlessly on the floor like sad potatoes. Hacking becomes necessary on some of the tougher enemies: Starbreeze has shown Kilo stripping the armour from a souped-up enemy tank-man with his chip, before riddling him with holes from his gun. Which, it should be noted, can fire round corners. It's the *future*, after all.

Getting the timing right to complete both breaches and hacks peppers firefights with small moments of challenge, and completing both actions pays out in "IPA points." These are used to power a slow-motion ability called Dart Vision that makes singling out incoming grenades and defusing them a little simpler, as well as making firefights easier to analyze. Selecting your breach target is as easy as lining him up in your crosshairs and activating the ability, but players who manage to hit specific timings will get more IPA. It's a system that tacitly rewards stylish play, wheedling players into perfecting timings and using their abilities to get the maximum reward.

But how does Kilo cope when he can't crawl inside the cranial cavity of his victims and rewire their frontal lobes? Not everyone in *Syndicate*'s future can afford a Dart 6 chip, and strangely, that can make them more dangerous. Society is split into "Up" and "Down" zones. The denizens of Down areas more likely to lack the cash necessary to get an implanted chip. But they're still ferocious fighters, and all of Kilo's technical woo-hoo won't make a dent on their fully organic brainpans. Lucky, then, that Kilo can fall back on old-fashioned combat tactics: put bullet in face to win.

Syndicate's combat looks advanced. Enemies aren't glued to crates, doomed to poke their heads above their chosen parapet until they're popped off by an opportunistic player. They switch cover, and their bullets are as painful to you as yours are to them. Different Syndicates fight in different ways, too, meaning the tougher enemies you'll face—unchipped and chipped-to-the-eyeballs alike—will force you to switch tactics on the fly.

The switch from top-down squad management makes more sense for *Syndicate* than it does for *XCOM*. Those who pine for the return of the series do so not for the squad-management mechanics and clunky combat, but for the game's dark dystopia and grisly humor. In Starbreeze's reboot, it looks like they'll be able to see that, only now from a much closer vantage point. ■ ***Rich McCormick***

Release FEB 2012

It's not looking particularly promising for this guy.

BATTLEFIELD 3

PLAYED IT In Operation Metro, you don't need tanks to succceed

I find myself cornered in a tiny room deep underground. I was tempted to just give up and settle in—I could hang some drapes, get some doilies, really make this tiny room a home—but my squadmates were determined to make a push for the Operation Metro's objective. Despite the huge open stretch of station platform beyond the door, lit up by half-a-dozen laser sights combing the area. Despite the distant scope glint of some snipers deeper down the tunnel, and despite a couple of grenades sailing in. Wait. Grenades. Take cover!

We dashed away from the door as the grenades detonated. We could hear the faint patter of sub-machinegun fire slamming into the other side of the wall. This was going to be tough.

I was playing Assault class. Formerly the most useless of the four classes in *Bad Company 2*, he can now throw down medical packs to heal teammates and use defibrillators to magic people back from the dead. I started throwing bags of medicine around the room as our team took potshots back through the door.

Resurrection day

The squad system is central to the ebb and flow of *Battlefield 3*'s scraps. Dead members of any four-man squad can spawn on one of the surviving members, giving that player spawn points for staying alive long enough to get his companions back into the fight. That way, single players can infect small areas, which means innocuous low walls or a burned-out bus you've dashed past dozens of times can suddenly become vitally important if a squad moves in and sets up shop. That's what we were trying to do in our tiny underground room, and I was starting to think that we'd picked a bad place to move inside when our hole suddenly became much larger.

There was a distant *whoosh*, a shuddering crunch, and the entire wall was suddenly torn away. Glaring white light poured in through the smoke, quickly followed by a deafening storm of bullets. There are no tanks for Engineers to target in Operation Metro, but that doesn't mean their rocket launchers are useless. *Battlefield*'s terrain can be blown apart. Grenades can crack cover and scatter shards of debris across the landscape. Rockets can tear buildings to pieces. They do a good job on soldiers, too, which is unfortunate. As the smoke clears we see another rocket hurtling toward us down the tunnel.

I should probably have run. My teammates did, scrambling for the safety of the corridor. I just stood and watched the fiery trail of the rocket illuminate the tunnel as it passed before dipping and slamming into the floor a few meters short. A lucky escape. We retreated behind a cluster of metal cabinets. The storm of incoming lead sparked against the makeshift cover. The beautiful lighting of the Frostbite 2 engine isn't just there to make war look pretty. Light can be a

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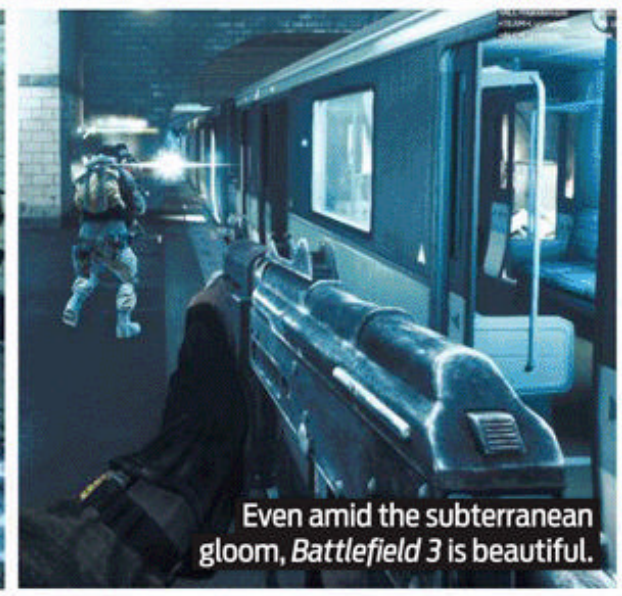
www.ea.com/battlefield3



weapon. A few teammates flick on the high-powered lamps hooked up to the underside of their guns, throwing blazing spotlights onto the walls. Any enemy caught in the glare would find themselves blinded. The downside is that the lamps give away your position to everyone nearby. Another rocket sailed past and put a small crater in the wall behind us. Yep. They definitely had our position.

Live together, die alone

Then the assault began. We returned fire, cutting down some Engineers charging optimistically across the opening platform toward us. A squadmate called Moofers stood up and planted his weapon on a cabinet. The new Support class has access to devastating light machineguns. They can unfold their weapon's bipod and plant it on the ground to make their powerful weapon even more accurate. Fire erupts from Moofers' barrel as he throws fire toward the glittering muzzle flash of a cluster of enemy Assault soldiers hiding in a train carriage. It doesn't matter if he hits anything. Near misses can suppress enemies, causing their screen to become hazy and sending their accuracy haywire.

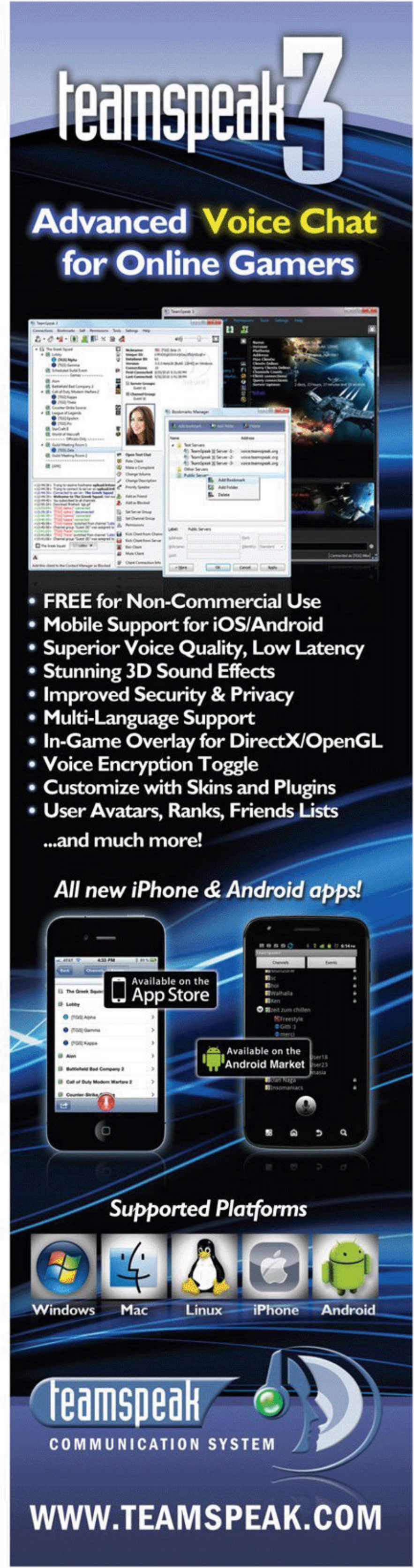
A moment later, Moofers was dead, nailed in the face by a sniper bullet. Scope glint lets you see snipers from vast distances. It's terrifying to know that a marksman a hundred meters away has you in his sights, but scope glint is a brilliant addition. It greatly reduces the likelihood of being killed by an opponent you had no chance of spotting.

I dashed over to Moofers and clumsily zapped him in the shoulder with my defibrillator pads. He sprang back up, right as rain. Then an enemy Engineer came out of the corridor behind us. I happened to be facing the right direction. I whipped out my pistol and shot him several times in the chest. He died. I spun around, brought up my assault rifle and started to help my squadmate fill the train carriage with bullets. Numbers started ticking across my screen. I was gaining points by the bucketload. Suppression bonus! Enemy down! Headshot! This is brilliant, I thought. I'm doing war!

Then my view wrenched back, filled with the face of an enemy Engineer. As I collapsed I saw the knife he'd just used to finish me. Before you die in *Battlefield 3*, you spend a moment on the floor, with one clawed hand outstretched, begging for help. My character reached out to my squadmate, who was still focused on hammering the train carriage, oblivious to the Engineer behind him. Then the enemy grabbed him by the neck and raised the knife. Moofers, no!

I felt sad for a second, but then, ooh! I've levelled up! Hey, a new gun barrel! Three seconds later, I'm back in the game, running through corridors with my new gun. Even without tanks or jets, *Battlefield 3* is intense and beautiful. It's going to be fantastic. ■ *Tom Senior*

Release OCTOBER



MAX PAYNE 3

FIRST LOOK Eight years after his fall, the PC's gravelliest, grimmest hero returns

Mull this over: it's been eight years since we last saw Max rip a raw, bloody wound through the New York criminal underbelly, but no one has managed to take his place. *Kane & Lynch* tried, and they're still trying, but for grumpy, hyper-violent third-person action, we really need some more Max.

Despite a new haircut for Max and the sunnier setting of Sao Paulo, it's clear Rockstar is sticking to the well-worn path Max has trod before. The game even starts in New York. Brazil does feature a lot, but this wouldn't be a Max Payne game without a dingy, Big Apple corridor to tear up.

READ ME
PUBLISHER
Rockstar Games
DEVELOPER
Rockstar
LINK
www.maxpayne3.com

The game begins in Max's apartment, where he's under siege from a mob family. Max has killed the boss's son, an incident that'll send him to Brazil, fleeing from the rage of the criminals. When Max runs out into the corridor blasting at the mob guys and drops into bullet-time, everything feels spot on.

The world slows as the trench-coat-clad ex-cop blasts his hand-cannons. I can pick out bullets leaving the gun. The guy at the end of the corridor folds. The sniper rifle laser sights coming through the window are easy to dodge as time takes a break. Coming out of bullet-time, the noise and bodies play catch-up, and everything rushes into place with a chaotic *whoosh* as satisfying as the violence.

On the run

The story bounces between New York and Brazil. After he flees New York, Max ends up working as a security chief for the Brancos, a wealthy Brazilian family. Their riches make them the target of a paramilitary group called the Cracha Preto, which has kidnapped the trophy wife of the family's boss, Rodrigo Branco.

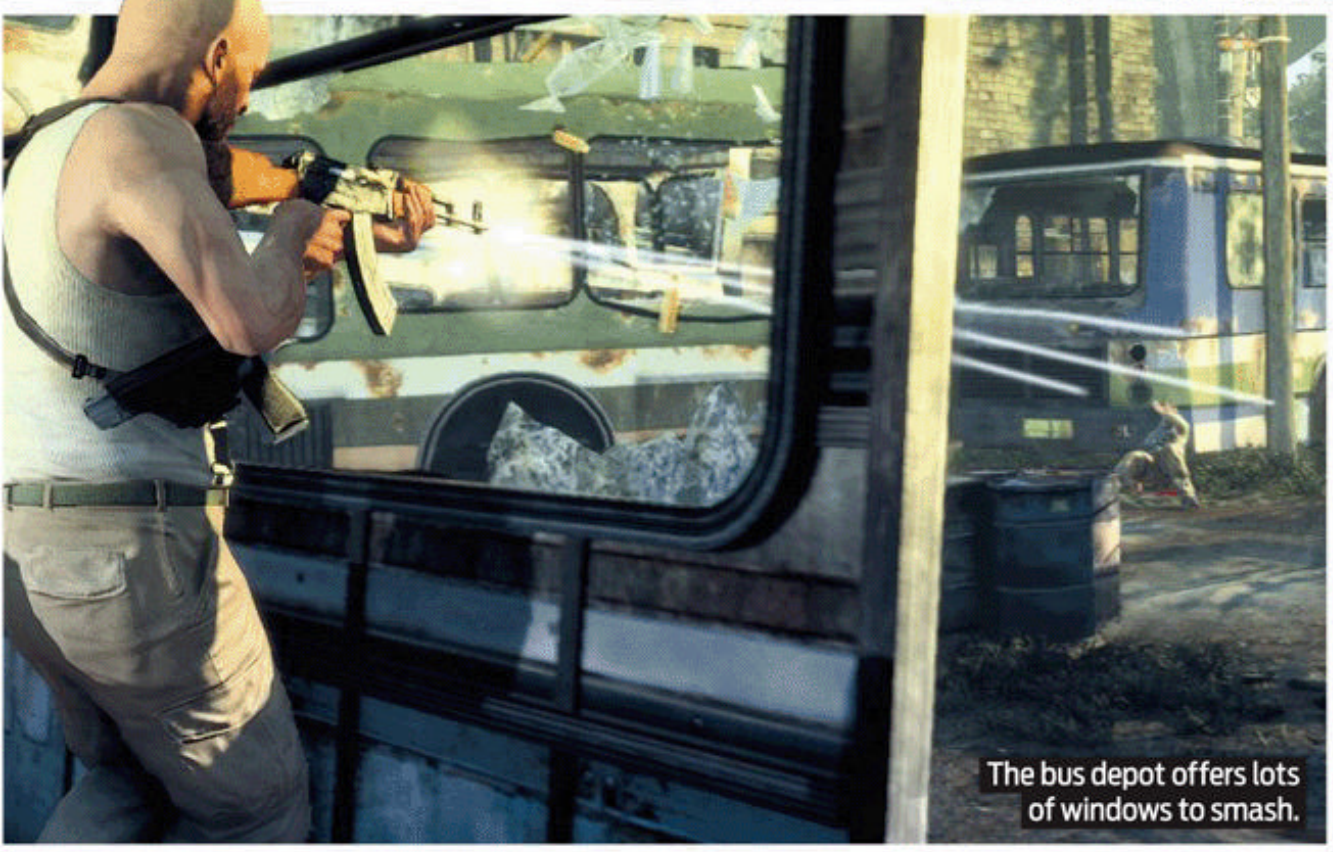
In one level of the game, members of the Cracha Preto rappel into the Brancos' HQ while Max is escorting an IT guy to the server room. The open-plan office is a perfect place to show off the new cover mechanics. Max sticks to the walls, and ducks under desks. He can blind-fire over and around the edge of cover, which he does to kick things off. While it's a concession to stealth, there's a lot more fun to be had just running around and gunning.

Rockstar may be known for building open worlds, but this is a tightly choreographed bolt. Modern offices are great places for shootouts: everything explodes in papery, glassy blasts under Max's dual-Uzi onslaught. There's just enough cover to take people unaware, and Max now has a disarm move where he throws a few punches at a nearby enemy before yanking their gun from their grasp.

The bullet trail camera, which follows a kill-shot from the barrel of Max's gun to the target, kicks in when Max fires at an

This is why we won't join our local Neighborhood Watch.

Max channels the "John McClane from *Die Hard*" look.



The bus depot offers lots of windows to smash.

Explodable stationery really adds pizzazz to office shootouts.

enemy in front of a glass window. The bad guy spins backward out the window, the camera following his final moments in a haze of blood and broken glass. It's a nice reward for the player, and it also lets you know that you've just shot the last bad guy of the section.

Further on, after Max has a battle with a heavily armored minigun boss, the offices explodes. Stumbling through the ruined building, Max must contend with collapsing floors and flames. But even limping and nearly on fire, he still has to shoot people. Max battles through the flames. No wonder he's grumpy.

Game noir

The game is punctuated with cinematic moments. There are tiny instances of obligatory bullet-time, like in a warehouse sequence where the level floods with enemies and you're given a few seconds of unlimited ammo. Max leaps from a balcony to a hook, slow-motion kicks in, and he's dangling, gunning everyone in sight.

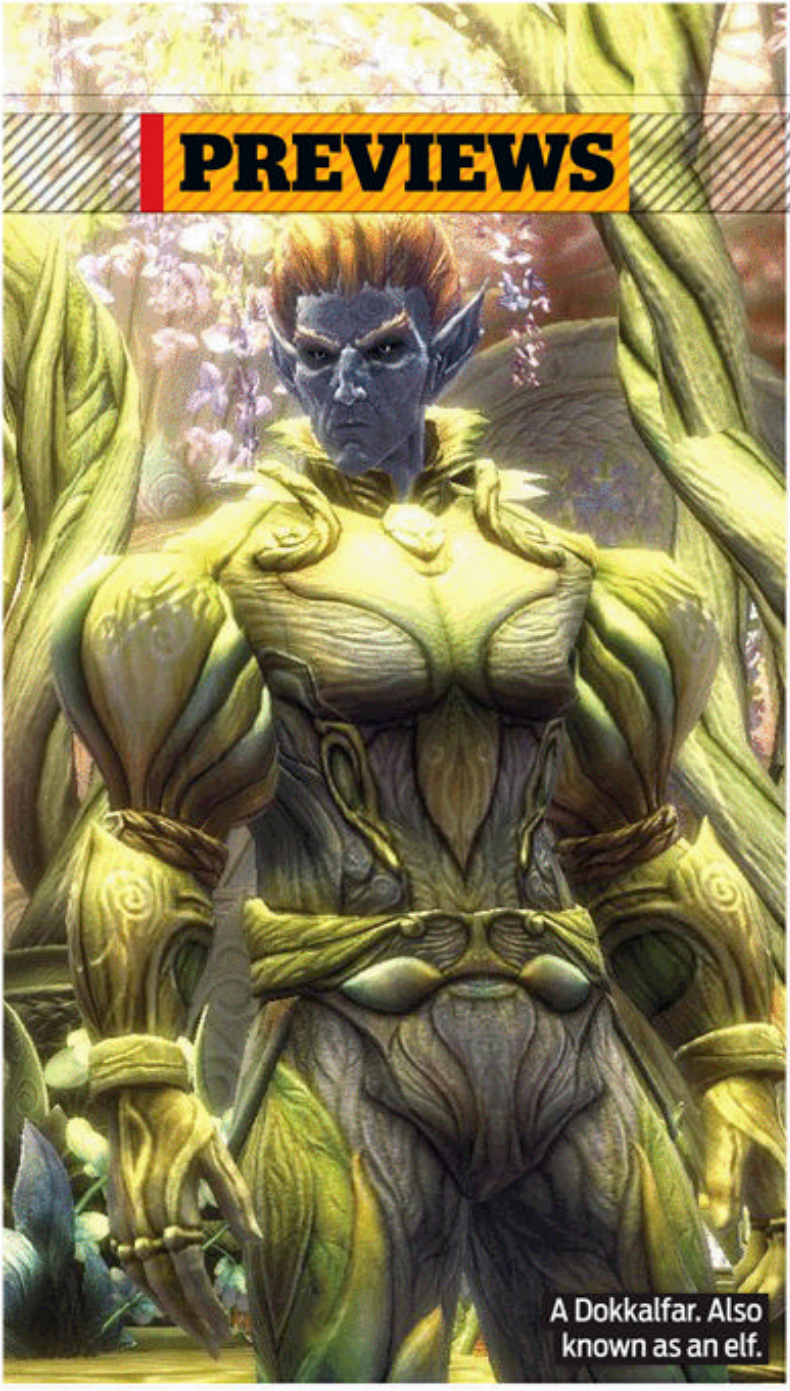
The warehouse is part of a bus depot, where Max is leading Giovanna, a girlfriend, and the explosive gas station produces impressive, concussive blasts that destroy a bus and rocket enemies through the air. Other points of interest include a gunfight in the station garage that ends with Max shooting the control panel on a massive platform, dropping the bus resting on it onto the heads of the enemies who were using it for cover. Later, Max's bullets help a loose balcony on its way to collapse.

It looks lovely in slow motion, but laid-back it's not. When Max and Giovanna have to commandeer a bus to make their escape, the inevitable happens—an on-rails shooting section. Yet Rockstar seems to be neatly side-stepping the usual pitfalls: the section is short and it's explosive. Giovanna drives while Max leans out the front door and unleashes his Uzi on the paramilitary types. Even in a bus, Max can use bullet-time to pick out the gas pumps, although the constant forward movement leaves the resulting plume of flame somewhere on your peripheral vision. The demonstration ends with the bus crashing and a fitting fade to black.

Truth be told, the action hasn't moved on that much in the dormant years. The NPCs are a bit smarter, but this is the sort of stuff that Remedy delivered nearly a decade ago, just with spit and polish and some additional action moments. It's still told with grave narration, the story is still delivered through graphic novel–style cut-scenes, though now they put scenes from the game and into each panel.

In fact, the only concession to what we expect from a modern game is the hidden multiplayer that Rockstar has confirmed but refuses to talk about. In pretty much every other aspect, Max has refused to change with the times. It's the old Max, just in a new set of clothing. ■ ***Craig Pearson***

Release 2012



A Dokkalfar. Also known as an elf.

"You cad! Turn off that electromagnet!"

Kingdoms is a traditional single-player RPG.

KINGDOMS OF AMALUR RECKONING

FIRST LOOK A brainless, fun, and happily clichéd RPG

I've been spoiled by RPGs. A man came up to me in the forests of Amalur, growling like a dog. "Two-legs!" he said. "Two-legs, I've been cursed. I am a wolf, doomed to walk the forest as a human."

Ahhh, I thought. I know this one. The unconvincing gait, the pseudo-Furry voice-acting. He'll be a delusional mentalist, and after I've done his quest, it'll turn out he was a human all along.

Into the woods I headed, to activate the shrines that would "turn him back." Very good joke, *Reckoning* writers! Curse lifted, I returned to my friend to find he was now a wolf. "Thank you, two-legs!" he growled, before loping off.

Either I'm too cynical, or *Reckoning*'s RPGery is simplistic. Yet what the game lacks in knowing questline winks and voiceover budget, it gains in charming fantasy bashing. In the process of helping Dr. Van Wolfington, I had to carve a swath through the local wildlife that was so great the ecosystem might never recover.

I had to carve a swath through the wildlife so great the ecosystem might never recover.

It was breezily simplistic: left clicks for standard attacks, right for magic. You can be warrior, rogue, or mage, but you don't have to make an immutable class choice at some arbitrary point. Your specialization is based your clothes, your weapons, and the points you plug into magic, dexterity, and strength trees. It is also possible to be a jack-of-all-trades who cycles through a group of weapons.

I based my class choice on my looks. Tempted by an offensively ginger mustache in the character creation screen, I dressed my dark-skinned Dokkalfar (elf, to you and me) in magic robes and handed him a magic staff. Only a mage could get away with such pompous facial hair. That weapon choice made my standard three-hit combo a set of gloriously colorful magic gusts, each increasing in power. Against little groups of traditional fantasy foes—look, real-life kobolds!—I was overpowerful. But when I delved too deep into the dungeons to complete *Reckoning*'s fantasy-standard quests—kill some things, bring me their noses—I had to ditch the staff and break out my more powerful moves.

Over two hours, I unlocked two key spells. The first was a weighty ball of lightning, but the second was a little more fun: I could mark up to four enemies with little embers, then retreat to a safe distance, clench my fist, and watch as they burst into flames.

Get sufficient kills and you can enter "reckoning" mode, where your attacks do more damage and everything gets a neato blue tinge. Stun an enemy in this mode and you'll get a few seconds to execute a similarly hefty finishing move.

Reckoning might be simplistic, but it's lightweight in a way that's reminiscent of a more streamlined and less overwrought version of the *Fable* games. ■ ***Rich McCormick***

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3 MONTHS AWAY

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: WAR IN THE NORTH

Form your own fellowship and melee and magic your way through Middle-earth's jerks. They have it coming.

Release NOVERMBER 1

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

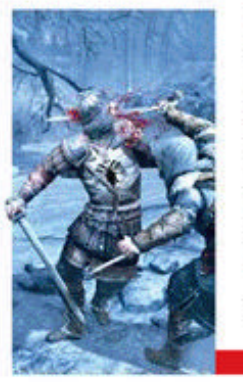
Christmas comes early for the young tykes of *PC Gamer*. A new world-wandering, magic-wielding RPG from Bethesda. Fight dragons with swords. Yay.

Release NOVERMBER 11

SAINT'S ROW THE THIRD

The wacky *Grand Theft Auto*–style crime simulator. It has the open city, loads of cars and missions and, er, a giant purple dildo as a weapon. OK, maybe not *exactly* like *GTA*.

Release NOVERMBER 15



ASSASSIN'S CREED: REVELATIONS

Ezio is now 50, but he's no less nimble than he was. The roof-skipping assassin's final game will tie together the conspiracy *and* let you zipline around ancient Rome.

Release DEEMBER 2

6 MONTHS AWAY

COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

Valve is rejigging *CS* for the Post-*Modern Warfare* world. New modes, new guns, it's built for both competitive types and the newbs who've never given it a whirl.

Release EARLY 2012

F1 ONLINE

Renowned racing developer Codemasters wants you to live and breathe Formula One, which is why it's creating a world where you can bathe yourself in racing goodness for days at a time.

Release EARLY 2012

GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER

Tom Clancy's franchise keeps on ticking in this near-future-set excursion into Russia to battle against ultra-nationalist forces. Watch out, bad guys.

Release FEBRUARY

XCOM

The aliens are coming. Or, given that the game is set in 1962, maybe they've already taken over and we just don't know it yet. You'll have to take on the role ofAgent William Carter yourself to find out.

Release MARCH

9+ MONTHS AWAY

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

Blood Money's betrayal sets murdering murderer Agent 47 loose. The new *Hitman* seems to break free from the conventions of the series, allowing for more action and larger levels.

Release 2012

DISHONORED

The game Arkane was formed to make: an emergent, immersive sim where you're an assassin with world-bending powers. It looks like *Deus Ex* if it were crossed with *Half-Life 2*.

Release 2012

FAR CRY 3

Returning to the tropical setting of the original game, the bright colorful shooter hides a dark, horrible story of someone trying to escape an island of evil people. Open and very violent.

Release 2012

PREY 2

The follow-up to the 2006 shooter features a new protagonist, U.S. Marshal Killian Samuels, who's making a living as a bounty hunter on the alien planet of Exodus. Shoot 'em up!

Release 2012

BEST GUESS

Marvel Universe
News about Gazillion Entertainment's *Marvel Universe*, the MMO based on the classic superhero franchise, has been nearly nonexistent since the announcement back in April. We know it'll be free-to-play, but with no word yet on a beta test, it will probably be at least the end of 2012 before we can get our Thor on.

ON YOUR RADAR THE TOP 13 MOST-ANTICPATED PC GAMES

1. DIABLO III
2. STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC
3. RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY
4. COD: MODERN WARFARE 3
5. **GUILD WARS 2** ▶▶
6. FAR CRY 3
7. ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM
8. BATTLEFIELD 3
9. HITMAN: ABSOLUTION
10. BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY
11. NEED FOR SPEED: THE RUN
12. MASS EFFECT 3
13. ASSASSIN'S CREED: REV.

"I'm going to play an elementalist so I can BURN ALL THE THINGS! :)
—@moosefaces, via Twitter

"Serious support skills and crazy armor? We have a killer right here."
—@KhalidAKH, via Twitter

Source: Ipsos OTX GamePlan Insights. Top titles based on purchase intent are collected via a weekly tracking study of 1,000 active gamers in the US between the ages of 13-59. Since launching in 2008, GamePlan has collected data on over 100,000 gamers across 2,500+ titles.

Windows®. Life without Walls™, CyberPower recommends Windows 7

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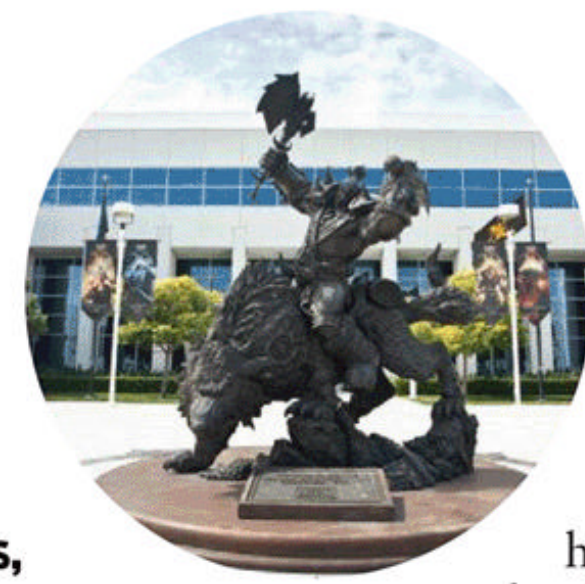
SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

How do you please a rabid fanbase while delivering a fresh, new experience? Blizzard is finding out how with **DIABLO III** *by Nathan Grayson*



Waiting in the lobby of Blizzard's Irvine headquarters, I was overcome by nostalgic reverence. Where most businesses have a mountain of months-old magazines, Blizzard has a museum. It was nothing too extravagant, mind you, but the frames lining the walls were like windows to my childhood. Each piece of classic *Diablo* art conjured up fond memories of the franchise that's marking its 15th birthday this November.

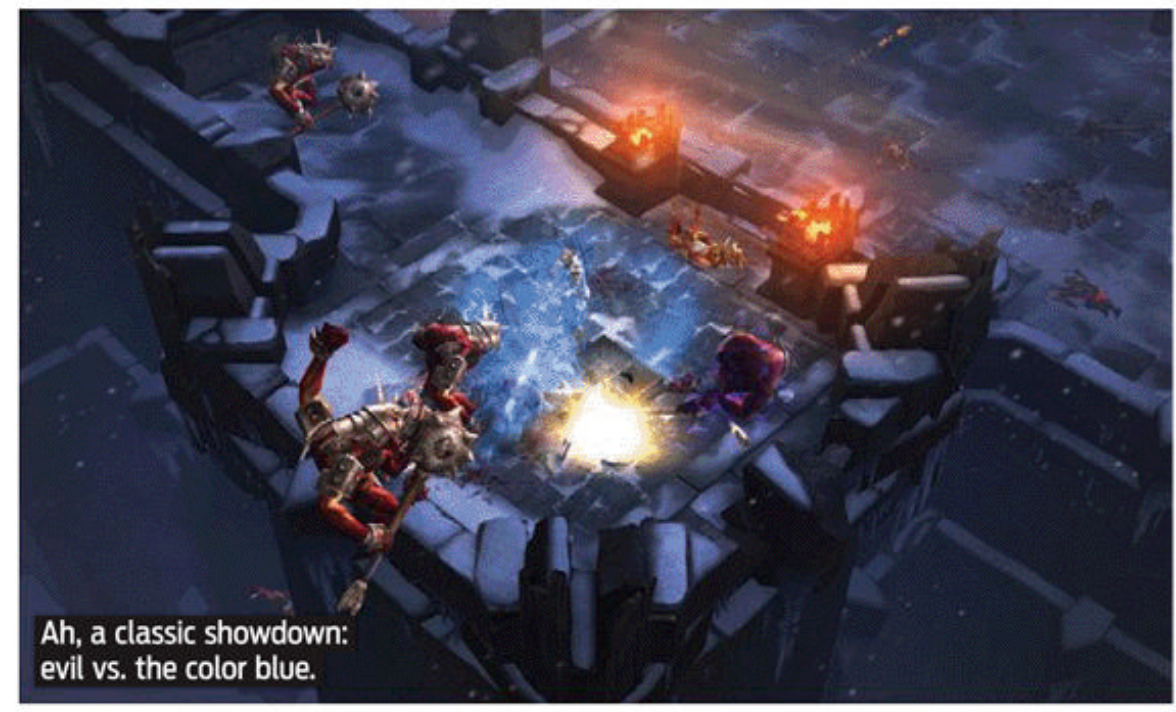
It wasn't always this way, however. Blizzard certainly didn't begin its existence as a gaming giant responsible for both this generation's *Dungeons & Dragons* and the game that has become South Korea's national sport. Over the years, the company has seen both growth spurts and growing pains, both successes and, er, whatever *Warcraft Adventures* was. Many incredibly talented people have come and gone.

DIABLO III

This is the environment *Diablo III* has evolved in. To track its development is to see a balancing act made all the more precarious by countless shifts and upheavals. One thing, however, has always remained constant: fandom. I'm not just referring to *Diablo*'s near-militant community—*Diablo*'s story is one of diehard dedication on both sides of the table. Most of the original *Diablo* team, you see, is now gone. In its place is a band of folks who grew up playing *Diablo* and *Diablo II* as fans, just like you or I. Now they're shaping the franchise's present and future, but—thanks to that ridiculously passionate community—they're also trying their damndest to avoid losing sight of the past.

"When we started, we really inherited this big scary game," explained game director Jay Wilson. "There are very few of us who actually worked on the previous *Diablo* games, so a lot of us came at it more as fans. When you're building something that you didn't originate, the struggle that you have is, how do you remain true to it while also being true to your own creative nature? If you make something, you can't just copy. You have to infuse it with your own personality, your own interests, your own opinions, your own desires. If you don't, then it will be soulless."

It almost seems fitting—a game about, you know, the devil that sells its own soul. Sorry, though, Satan: this just isn't your day.



Ah, a classic showdown: evil vs. the color blue.

In the beginning

Everybody's had those first moments with a new game that really define the entire experience. *Diablo III*'s origins, then, lie not in some linear extension of the original *Diablo*'s creative vision, but in those player-driven experiences. Hearing Wilson describe his love affair with the first *Diablo* drove that point home.

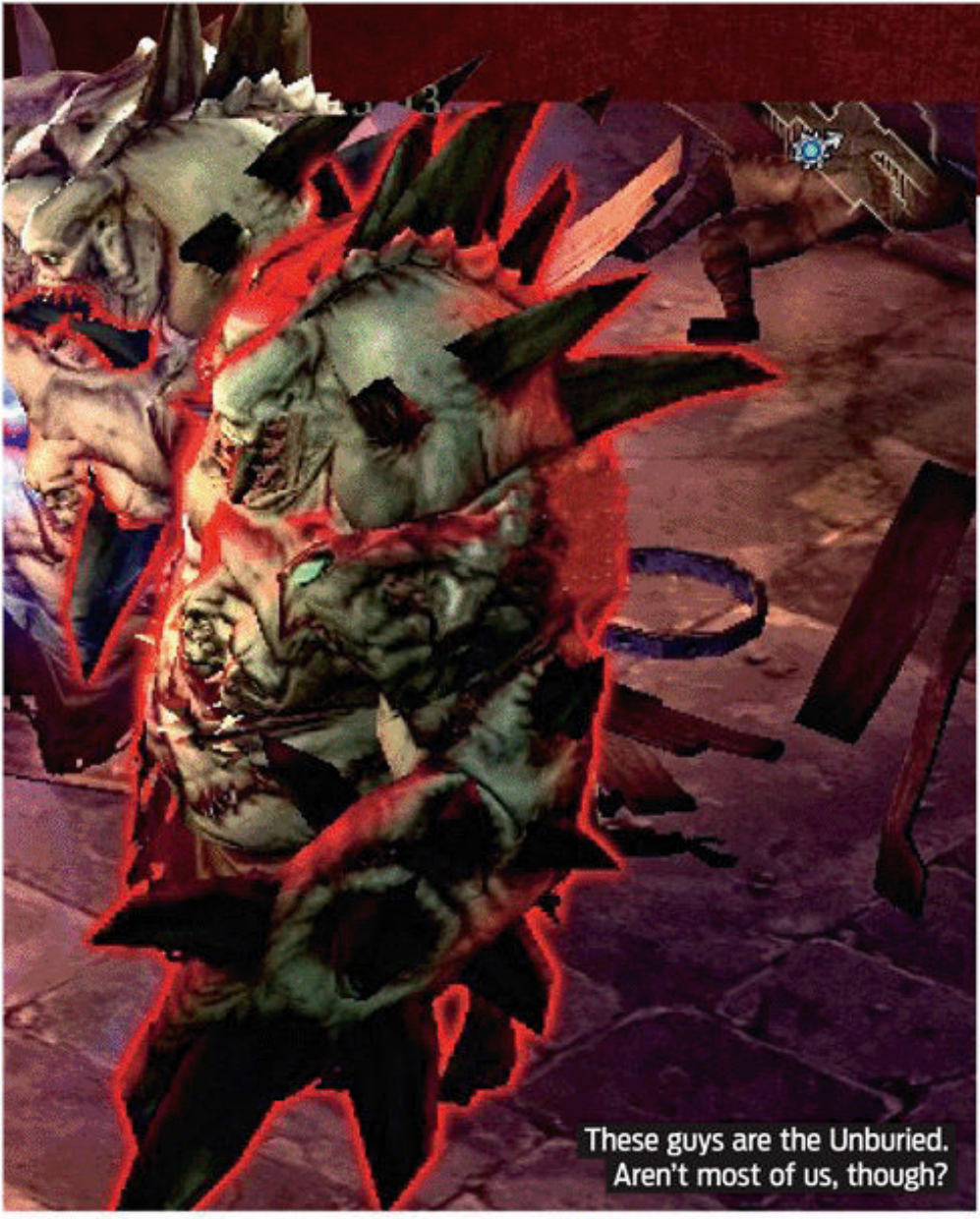
"It was when I bought *Warcraft II*," he said. "On the back of the CD case they had an ad for *Diablo*. It had a picture of the warrior with his sword and shield, standing in front of the church door with the red light streaming out of it. That image was so compelling to me that I wanted to play that game. I didn't even know what it was and I wanted to play it. I remember, back then there was so little information. You just didn't know a lot about games before they came out. So to have an image so compel me, I always remember that.

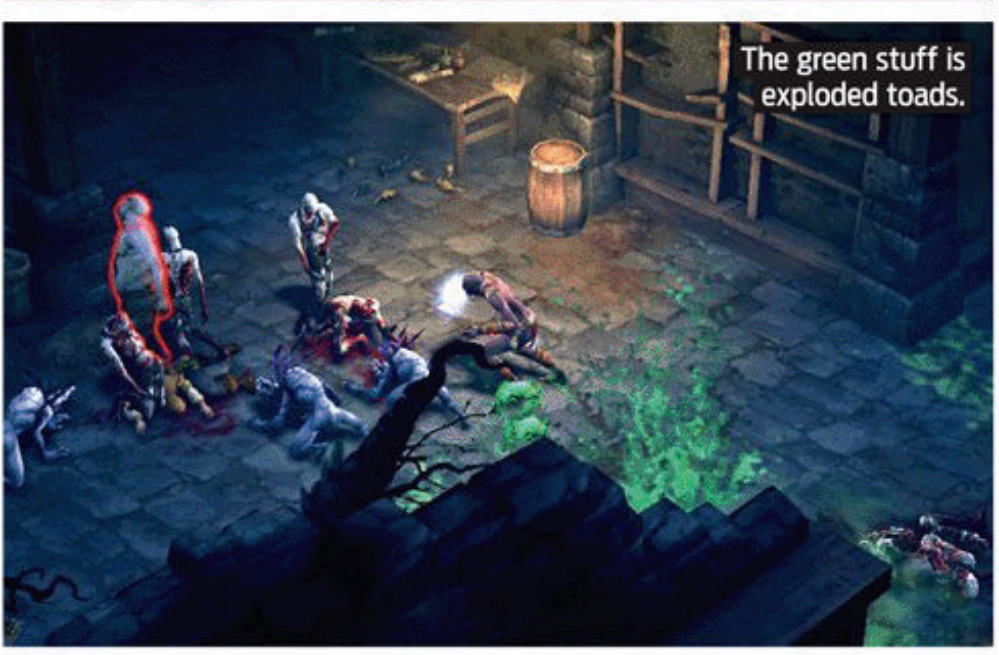
"The day I installed it, I told my wife 'You need to leave the house, because it's *Diablo* time now.' '*Diablo*' spoken in hushed tones. And it was all the classic moments: the first encounter with the butcher, the first encounter with the Skeleton King, the first time a hundred goatmen come running at you and you manage to survive by the skin of your teeth. The first time you griefed somebody who was your teammate. There are all those great moments that I think everyone had."

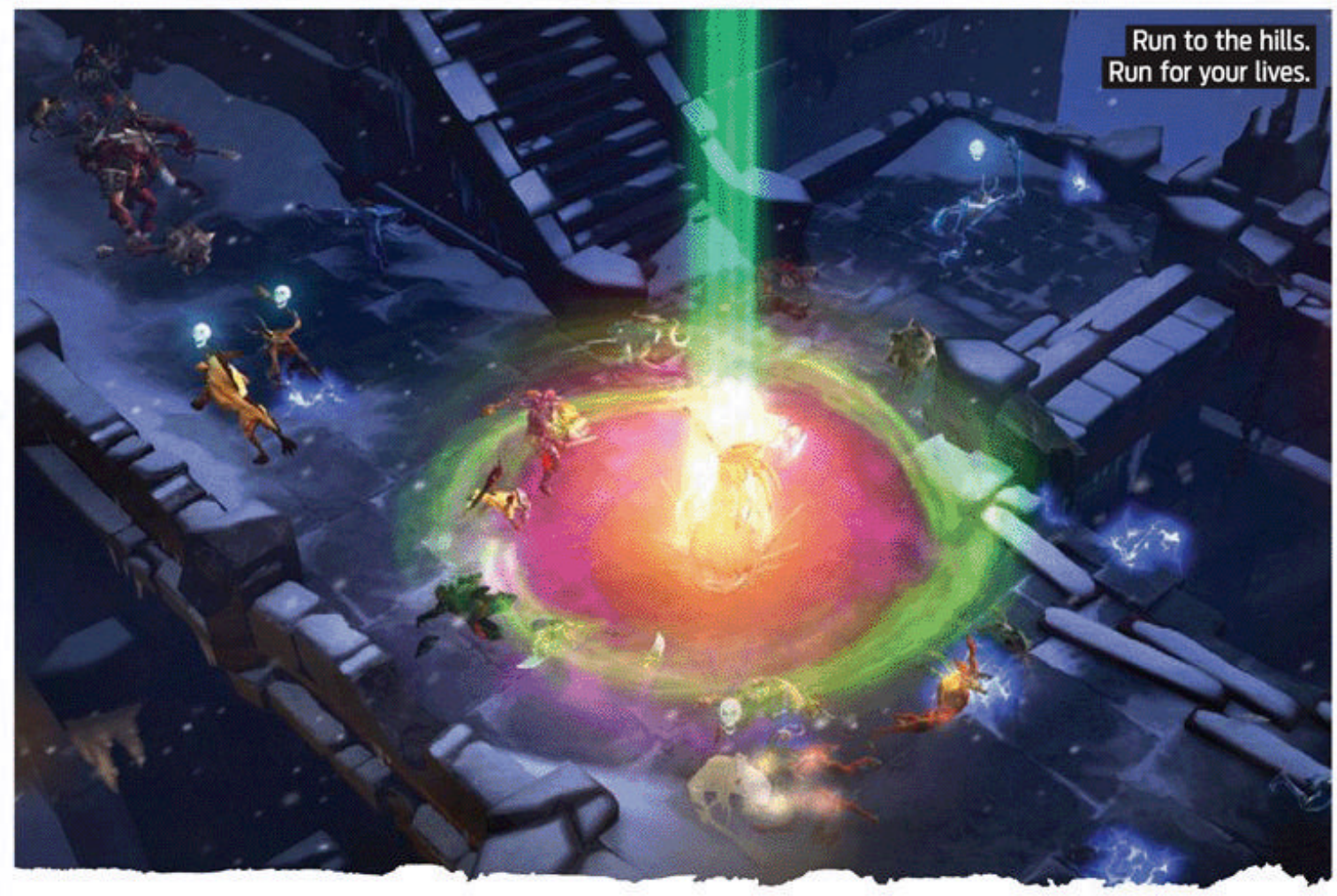
Hindsight, however, stops being 20/20 when rose-tinted glasses are involved. For Wilson and the rest of *Diablo III*'s development team, avoiding that trap is the biggest challenge. When is it appropriate to give diehard fans precisely what they want? And—perhaps more importantly—when do you fire back with a stern "No"?

"The first [change in *Diablo II*] was the expansion of the world," said Wilson, giving an example. "The fact that they took the world beyond Gothic dungeons—that opened up the world. It guaranteed that *Diablo* wouldn't be a one-note franchise. What's interesting is at the time, that was just as controversial as when we started showing off *Diablo III* and people grumbled about the art. Most don't remember that people did the exact same grumbling about *Diablo II* the first time they saw the deserts. It's important to push the boundaries a little bit, or it becomes too small to hold your interest for very long."

Similarly, some of *Diablo II*'s craftier players even managed to create their own non-gold-based economic system and a series of unspoken rules governing things like PvP. A miniature culture arose, and many players had a very personal stake in it. Naturally, things like *Diablo III*'s auction house and always-online requirement strike these fans as utter blasphemy. Those same fans,







DIABLO DID IT FIRST

November 30, 1996, marks the 15th anniversary since gamers first set a virtual foot into the world of *Diablo*. All these years later, its influence still looms large: this is a game that indelibly Zorro-slashed its own image into the very fabric of the gaming industry. Don't believe me? Then have a gander at just a few of the things *Diablo* popularized.

COLOR-CODED LOOT As seen in *Borderlands*, *Dead Island*, *Hellgate: London*, *Rift*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Titan Quest*, *Torchlight*, *World of Warcraft*

TALENT TREES As seen in *Age of Empires*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Mass Effect 3*, Every MMORPG Ever, *StarCraft*

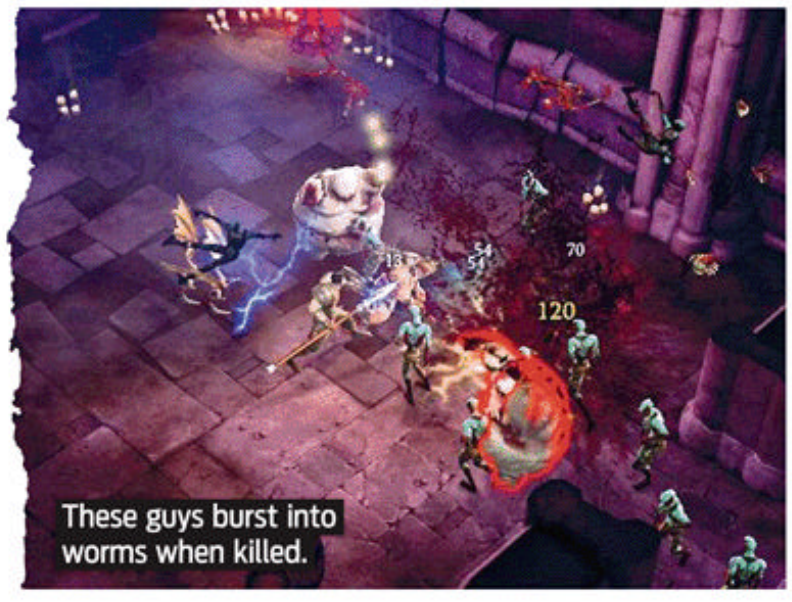
DROP-IN/DROP-OUT CO-OP As seen in *Brink*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Gears of War*, *Kane & Lynch*, *LEGO Star Wars*, *Resident Evil 5*

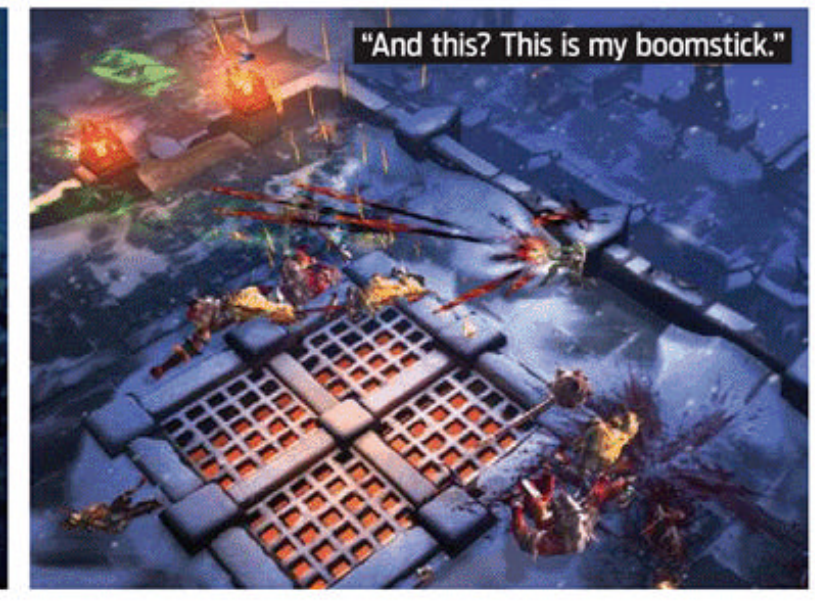
CLICK-CLICK-CLICK COMBAT As seen in *Bastion*, *Darkspore*, *Divine Divinity*, *Dungeon Siege*, *Sacred*, *Titan Quest*, *Torchlight*

RANDOMIZED LEVELS/LOOT/ENEMIES As seen in *Borderlands*, *Dead Island*, *Hellgate: London*, *Minecraft*, *Phantasy Star Online*, *Terraria*

"The day I installed it, I told my wife 'You need to leave the house, because it's *Diablo* time now.'" *Jay Wilson, Game Director*

DIABLO III





"Early on, we actually even explored concepts—this is going to sound crazy—like if the demon hunter could climb on the barbarian's shoulders and shoot from there." *Wyatt Cheng*
Senior Technical Game Designer

however, fail to remember precisely why they had to carve out their own makeshift online society in the first place.

Wilson explained, "The truth is, the player-based economy developed to overcome what was essentially a flaw in the game. When we look back on those things, we look back on them with fondness. 'Like, wow, remember how screwed up that was that we had to use Stone of Jordans to trade for stuff?' We forget that the start of that sentence was 'Remember how screwed up that was?' I don't think the community was defined by those things. I think you have a very small group of people who have fond memories and think that those specific memories were more defining for *Diablo* than they actually were."

Don't call it *Diablo 2.5*

Wilson and Co. have a vision. It's not like they don't know what they're doing. So what exactly then is the hold-up? Why didn't the figurative Horadric Cube spit this thing out years ago? Well, for all *Diablo*'s click-click-click straightforwardness, its development process has been anything but. And no one ever said this was the first *Diablo III*.

"The [first version of *Diablo III*] that I saw was trapped in the exact place that I was concerned about us not going; it didn't feel like much of an evolution from *Diablo II*," Wilson admitted. "I think there was more concern about being 'true to *Diablo*' than there was about being fresh and interesting. There was a lot of really good stuff in it, though. A lot of it did go into the current *Diablo III* in one way or another. There was some great monster design. There was a boss fight in the old build that we've struggled to get as good as it was in that build. But it lacked that high-level feel of identity. People would look at it and say that it felt like *Diablo 2.5*. That's not the Blizzard way."

So then, what is the Blizzard way? What makes *Diablo III* tick? Truth be told, the development team didn't even know—at first. The best way to learn, however, is by doing, so do they did. The end result? *Diablo III* finally took on a life of its own.

"One of the biggest moments was when we developed the wizard," said Wilson. "The wizard really gave us some opportunities to be really out there in a way that we hadn't been with the barbarian. We just started to do all these crazy ideas that were based more in classic pen-and-paper role-playing games, and also played into over-the-top kills and combat that the team liked from fighting games and first-person shooters. It was a time when we got to fuse those things together, and it was the first time that the personality of the team made something that felt like *Diablo*, but also felt really unique. When we got to take that class and put it in front of the company, that was the first point where the company as a whole looked at the game and said, 'OK, you guys have figured it out now. You're not just exploring what *Diablo*'s going to be; you've figured it out.'"

And then it was smooth sailing off into a warm sunset, right? If only. Game development is never a cakewalk, and that goes double when you're walking the almost impossibly fine line the *Diablo* team is. What ultimately mattered most was picking a direction and sticking to it—come hell, high water, or incredibly tempting ideas based on X-Men comics.

"Early on, we actually even explored concepts—this is going to

THE COW LEVEL

The Cow Level is one of *Diablo*'s greatest legends, originating from a rumor that copious cow clicking in *Diablo* would unlock a secret level. In *Diablo II*, Blizzard cheekily gave that rumor life. And boy did that level ever have cows. Then there was the Cow King, a Hell Bovine who fired lightning bolts. It was, er, memorable, to say the least. So are the cows returning in *Diablo III*? "I'm not going to say," said senior world designer Leonard Boyarsky replied, eyes shifting suspiciously back and forth.

PHOTOS BY KEVIN SHARP, EXCEPT FOR JAY WILSON PORTRAIT

Apparently these guys are a big deal or something.

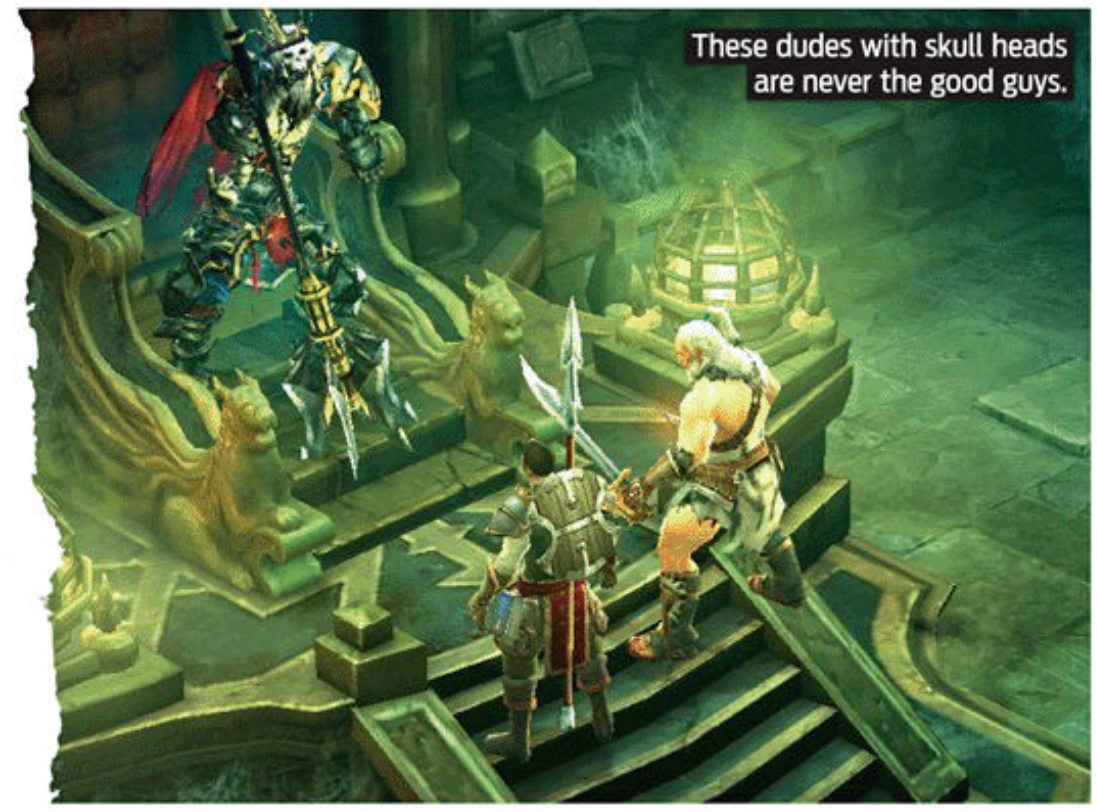
sound crazy—like if the demon hunter could climb on the barbarian's shoulders and shoot from there," enthused senior technical game designer Wyatt Cheng. "Or you have that classic image of Colossus throwing Wolverine, what is it, the Fastball Special? So what if the barbarian could pick up the monk and throw the monk? Each of those things that we implemented would've been something that a designer and an artist thought of and would look super awesome, but that everyone would have to do. You'd be limited by what we came up with."

Ultimately, then, that's what—according to the team—defines the franchise above all else. Other games throw in the kitchen sink without a second thought because, hell, why wouldn't you do that? Who doesn't love sinks? Meanwhile, *Diablo* slices and dices its perfectly sized portion of action with hours-long meetings.

"I spent probably four hours discussing with a programmer what happens when I have Magic Missile on my left mouse button, Arcane Orb on my right mouse button, and Wave of Force in my hot bar, and I hit all three at the same time, and then I keep hitting Magic Missile and I keep hitting Wave of Force, but Wave of Force is now in cooldown," rattled off Cheng, barely stopping to breathe. "To spend four hours discussing something so minute—and we have hundreds of those types of discussions—is ultimately what polish is all about.

"We love crafting our game. It doesn't get tedious for us, because different isn't better, better is better. If we take an idea that's been done before, but it's buried in some mud and dust and we crack off the mud and we dust it off, you have a diamond, right? It doesn't really have value until it's that shining diamond."

"So, um, just putting it out there: Ow."



These dudes with skull heads are never the good guys.

Shine on, you crazy demon

There's finally a light at the end of the tunnel. Though it may feel like you still have an eternity-long wait ahead of you, early 2012 is just around the corner. For both creators and fans alike, it's been a positively nail-biting process, but for Blizzard, the launch of a game is only the beginning. In some form or another, *Diablo III* will probably live long enough to see the actual End Times.

"We intend to support this game for years and years and years. As long as people are playing it and buying it, we're going to be supporting it," said senior producer Alex Mayberry. "I think all things are on the table. We are going to have updates, we will have patches, we'll fix bugs. I don't know exactly what model we're going to use yet and how deep we're going to go on those updates. I doubt that we would go as far as *World of Warcraft* does with some of their content, but that all remains to be seen. Step one, let's get the prime game out and we'll figure that stuff out soon."

In spite of Mayberry's words, though, Blizzard has already got a few rather gigantic ideas percolating around in its collective noggin. For one, the developer's done everything short of announcing that there will be a console adaptation of the series. Unless it pulls another *StarCraft: Ghost*, it's only a matter of time. That said, the franchise hasn't forgotten its heritage.

Mayberry explained, "We are still experimenting in that space. We're going to make sure that, as we progress with this experiment, we maintain what *Diablo* is. So yeah, I don't see it changing our focus. I just see it adding. It's [another] medium that we can put the game on. We want to give console players the *Diablo* experience as well. But our leading platform is always the PC."

Meanwhile on PC, *Diablo III*'s always-online multiplayer focus and auction house aren't exactly subtle about their main inspiration. So then, the perhaps multi-billion-dollar question: Is a *Diablo* MMO the next giant leap for Blizzard's not-so-small hack-n-slash?

"I don't think the world of *Diablo II* is diverse or varied enough to support, say, an MMO," Wilson said. "And we don't currently have plans for an MMO in the *Diablo* world, but my goal was that at the end of *Diablo III*, if that was something that we wanted to do, we'd feel like the world now could support it.

"I can say that the team really loves the *Diablo* universe, and it would be nice if whatever game we decide we want to make next, we decided was appropriate for that universe. It could be an MMO, it could be an RTS, it could be a third-person action game, it could be any variety of different things.

"I think the worst curse that can happen to a game universe is that it becomes so associated with a certain game type that the universe itself and the game are indistinguishable from each other," Wilson continued. "What we'd really like is to feel that the *Diablo* universe is diverse and interesting enough that you could put a whole bunch of different kinds of games in it—that the universe itself would live as its own entity. That's what we're more interested in. If we're going to keep this universe, let's make it a universe where we can do almost anything we want." ■

"We want to give console players the *Diablo* experience. But our leading platform is always the PC." *Alex Mayberry, Senior Producer*

DIABLO, THEN AND NOW

SKILLS

Then: "The skill trees for classes were a novel approach to how to build characters. No one had really done anything like that, and I think it's pretty telling that it was something that has become almost a staple in RPGs."

–Jay Wilson, game director

Now: "On the surface, our skill system looks actually less diverse than a normal skill tree. But the restriction of how many skills you can have, combined with all the rune variations of all those skills, and then different skills for different rune variations, and then passive variations, you get this exponential effect. I think we said that there were 69 billion potential builds for each class. With the system we have now, it's closer to 3 trillion."

–Wilson

MODS

Then: "That mod scene really kept games on the shelf; it added to the longevity of a lot of games. But the *Diablo* franchise has never lacked staying power. *Diablo* and *Diablo II* still sell today. Mods were never part of this universe. I guess mods never drove this franchise to begin with."

–Alex Mayberry, senior game producer

Now: "We never said that we were going to support mods. That reaction was kind of like it was something new, and it wasn't. If you're playing the game, it seems like a very simple, elegant game. Under the hood there's a lot happening. I'll often refer to it like if you look at a LEGO model of the Death Star, you say, 'Hey, that's just a sphere!' Break that thing apart and you think 'What am I supposed to do with this?'"

–Mayberry

CHEATING

Then: "It's easy to remember the past warmly. But there were a lot of hacks and cheats in the previous games that were game-breaking for people. Sometimes we look back at those times with a kind of Wild West memory, but I don't think we can accept that kind of freedom to break the game."

– Mayberry

Now: "One misconception is that *Diablo III* is a single-player game. It's not. It's a multiplayer game you can play alone. I see the arguments about, well, I won't be able to play it on my laptop while traveling. But you know what? When you get off the plane and get to your friend's house, you can log in and play your character. And if you throw in the fact that we have more tools for the community, more features on Battle.net, the auction house. The online requirement is necessary for the type of game we're building."

– Mayberry

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GABE NEWELL

DOTA + TF2 = MASSIVE WIN.

Valve's founder speaks out about his obsession with **DOTA 2**, *Half-Life: Episode 3*'s protesters, and what he thinks of EA's Origin ***by Owen Hill***

We're fans of the genre—we love to play these games

Valve is constantly surprising, from making one of its most popular games, *Team Fortress 2*, free to play to running a $1 million tournament for the upcoming *Dota 2*.

That makes any chance to speak to company cofounder Gabe Newell a pleasure, because you never know what you're going to get. I sat down with him to talk about his obsession with his company's new game, his thoughts on EA's Steam rival Origin, and what motivates him to come into work each day.

You've said in the past that Valve's model is to experiment at every point. Is that still what's going on at Valve with *Dota 2* and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*?

Absolutely. Gamescom was the first time we brought our own tournament, and in order to do that we built a lot of client-side and server-side technology that allows us to host it.

There are probably some changes we'll make, some improvements we'll make. Then it'll move into some of our other games to make sure we've thought through the issues. You know, if something works in an action RTS, how does it work in a first-person game? And as that evolves, it'll go into Steamworks so it's available for all our partners to use as well.

We see ourselves always thinking about what the opportunities are to do a better job for both our customers and our partners.

With The International, the million-dollar *Dota 2* tournament, was it your goal to cement it in people's minds as a competitive e-sport?

We think that we will really benefit as game developers from running this tournament. We already have. There's a very strong group of testers that IceFrog has been using throughout the development of *DotA*. We've been working with them on *Dota 2* to address their issues and incorporate their feedback into the game, so we've already been through four or five different versions of the user interface. It has evolved. You'd try something, they'd react, and then we'd go back to the drawing board.

For The International, it made a lot of sense at that point in development to get a bunch of people who play at this level and make sure that we address all their concerns. That's going to get fed back—the stuff that we're learning today is going to impact builds that we do next week. It's just part of that process of iterating through development.

It's something that Valve has always done with its games and, if you look at IceFrog's history, it's the same thing. There are all these differences between Defense of the Ancients 647 and 631 where he's continued to evolve. This, for us, is the right step. It has already been a very valuable experience for the entire development team to put this tournament on.

Do you think of *Defense of the Ancients* as a genre, considering how many games, like *League of Legends* and the upcoming Blizzard *DotA* game, use it as a template?

I think that the action-RTS genre is a great genre, so we're excited—we're fans of it. We got into this because a bunch of people at Valve were huge fans of what IceFrog had done, and it was great to find out that he was interested in doing the sequel that removed some of the constraints he'd been living with.

But you know, we're fans of the genre—we love to play these games ourselves, so we think it's great that there's more attention being paid and a lot of games are going to get developed.

So you don't mind that you'll be competing alongside the already-established *League of Legends*?

We've been around for a long time and there's always this assumption that videogames are a zero-sum game—that if *Quake* does really well, *Duke Nukem* will suffer. And that's never the case.

"After 800 hours, I'm still pretty much a *Dota 2* noob"

These guys would beat you at *Dota 2*. Just accept it.

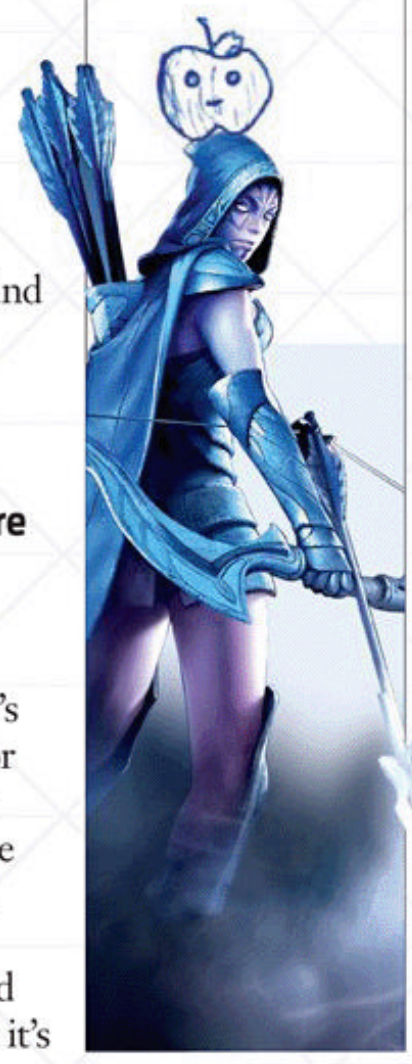
Gamers who play a good game want to play more games, not fewer games. So you're never hurt by the success of another game developer—you almost always benefit.

You know, when Zynga goes out and gets 100 million people playing one of their games in just two months, I think every game developer is benefitting. Not everyone should throw in the towel and say: "We've been defeated."

Does the same apply to digital distribution platforms? Does the existence of EA's Origin mean you're going to make more money?
I think right now there's always this temptation to assume that the way things are today is the way things are going to be tomorrow. Having been through this long enough in the games industry, I think I and everyone at Valve know that you're only as successful as what you've done lately. So the idea that Steam is somehow the answer to digital distribution ignores the fact that every two or three years, something is going to change dramatically.

It's like, along comes the Wii and that overthrows a bunch of ideas; along comes social gaming and that throws over a bunch of ideas. If you stand still and you're not doing the things that you need to do to be valuable in the future, you're going to be left behind really rapidly.

EA has said that Steam has restrictive terms of service. Can you shed any light on what they're referring to?
I don't really know what they're referring to by that. In general, with Steam and Steam partners, it's incumbent on us to create value for those partners, whether it's EA or Ubisoft or Take-Two, or any of the other developers who are using it. That's our goal, so we're going to keep trying to do that with EA and keep trying to convince them that it's worth it for them to have their games on Steam.



Have you tried Origin?
Yeah, I've tried it.

What did you think of it? Did you like it?
I think it does some things well. I think there are still some areas where, as a customer, I'd like to see it improve. It's not that different from any other system like this. There are positive things and negative things.

So what's your personal experience of *DotA*? Have you played it yourself and are you a fan of that genre?
I've played *Dota 2* for about 800 hours. The cool thing about *Dota 2* is that it's probably the game we've made that we're most obsessed with playing. As a game developer, you tend to get pretty tired of the thing you're developing because you have to experience all the flaws and the difficulties. *Dota 2*? Every day after we're done working on the game, everyone goes home and plays it till 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. So yeah, I love playing the game. I'm not even on the same plane as the guys who are playing here, so it's certainly exciting to see them play. After 800 hours I'm still pretty much a noob player when it comes to playing *DotA* games!

Why do you think the formula of *DotA* is such a success?
The thing that really struck me when I played *Dota 2* was that you're constantly creating and destroying plans in your head. You have a lot of expectations, but whether or not you're going to stay on that pathway is changing every five seconds.

As a designer I'm also struck by the fact that you go through this complete RPG arc in 40 minutes. I'm curious about the sense of incompleteness I always have after a match. The first thing you want to do after you've had a great game is play another game, and the first thing you want to do after you've had a bad game of *Dota 2* is play another game.

I think there are a lot of lessons for game designers in it that are very complementary to the lessons from other genres. If you play a lot of MMOs, there's stuff you can learn that's in *Dota 2*. If you play first-person shooters, there's a lot of stuff you can learn, so it's a nice arrow in the quiver for game designers.

Will we soon be wearing *Dota 2*-style hats in *Team Fortress 2*?
I'm sure there will be *Dota 2*-themed items in *TF2* at some point. After all, it is a wargame hat simulator. [*Laughs.*]

What did you think of the protesters that appeared outside your office, demanding *Half-Life: Episode 3*?
We thought it was awesome! We wanted them to stay. We took them

NOTE TO SELF: PROTESTERS MAY RESULT IN EP. 3 NEWS.

We love the PC—we value the hardware innovation

pizza—they'd only brought two sodas and they were planning on being out there for two days. They were very nice and very passionate about our games. At one point, somebody else in our building called the police and we were worried, but it turned out the police officer was a huge *Team Fortress* fan. He's like: "Oh yeah, I totally understand, let me go get my sign!"

So yeah, it was great for those guys to show up. We gave them a tour of the office, and then they went back outside and protested.

Are you worried you might get more protesters now?
I think it'd be great. They were very nice protesters, so we were definitely all excited.

They were obviously asking about *Episode 3*. Can you give us any news on that?
No, we don't have anything. If the protesters couldn't get it out of us…

How many protesters would it take to get some *Episode 3* news?
I don't know, but if they'd like to come out, we could find out.

Do you think that Steam has a responsibility to promote the PC in the same way that Microsoft or Sony promote their consoles?
It's a lot easier for me to think of it as having a responsibility to gamers and game developers. It's hard to test being the flagbearer for the PC. It's a lot easier to go out to customers and find out, "Do you like this? What do you dislike about this? How can we make this better?"

So we tend to be a little narrower in terms of how we try to think about what problems it needs to solve.

Obviously we love the PC, we love the openness of the PC, we value the hardware innovation. It wouldn't be possible to move this quickly if it weren't for the existence of an open internet client and an open hardware client like we have. It's why all the consoles are using PC graphics hardware now.

GIEF EP3! PLEASE!

Take him up on the challenge, internet!

There are always ads on TV for the latest games at Christmas. There's a PS3 one and an Xbox one, and I'd love it if there was a Valve one, saying: "That's on PC, and it looks better on PC, and here are all the games you can play on PC."
The thing that we've been successful with is Steam sales. The sales have done a really good job of creating a huge amount of support, for customers getting huge numbers of games, and for the developers. The thing that we tried in the last summer sale was to build a story and make the sale itself have entertainment value.

I think you'll see us do more of that in the future because it helps get people excited to try stuff that they haven't tried before. In other words, the revenue being generated by all game developers goes up when the vehicle that you're doing it by is in and of itself entertaining.

So we can expect to see more things like the *Portal 2* potato alternate reality game on Steam?
Oh absolutely. Obviously you can't just do another ARG like that, but that cross-game cooperative promotion was super effective. And even if you didn't buy any of those games, you still got entertainment value out of it.

As much as the individual developers created entertainment out of it, all of the fans had room to participate. They were as much a part of the overall value as the individual developers, and that's a really good sign.

Why do you think *Counter-Strike* is still so popular on Steam?
Counter-Strike is a really good game, and the value of a multiplayer game is embedded as much in the ecosystem as it is in anything. We're aware of that and we need to get an update out there to all those customers.

There are a bunch of people on the consoles who need an opportunity to play *Counter-Strike* and, we've been doing regular updates of *Counter-Strike: Source*, so we're making a larger investment and getting something out to those players as well.

Today, when Steamworks is on PS3 and there are a lot more multiformat games coming out, why does the PC still matter? Why is it still an important thing to have around?
People like their PCs. There are huge numbers of them and each person gets to have the one that they like rather than the one that someone else has defined for them. There were 350 million PCs sold last year, so the economies of scale are tremendous. You get great value for money.

Have you, like *Minecraft* creator Markus Persson, stopped looking at the prices of groceries as Valve has become more successful?
I think that different things motivate different people, and the most important thing for me has always been the social environment of the people that I work with. That's what motivates me. Some people are achievement motivated, some people are competitively motivated or financially motivated. For me, it's always been about opportunities to work with people I really like and respect. And to build stuff. In that sense, as Valve has been more successful, it's brought in an even more talented and stronger group of people for all of us.

For example, Michael Abrash joined recently and everyone in the company got a little bit smarter that day. And Jeremy Bennett is this world-class art director who was the art director for *King Kong*. When he walks in the door, everyone gets a little bit better and enjoys coming to work a little bit more. That's what motivates me. ■

id veteran, worked on Doom and Quake

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REVIEWS

Need to know

What is it?
Multiplayer shooter set on World War II's Russian front, where death is inevitable

Influenced by
Battlefield 2

Play it on
2GHz+ CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce GTX 260/Radeon HD 5750

Alternatively
Brothers in Arms: Hells Highway (85%)

Copy protection
Steam

It's the little things that have kept me playing it for 25 hours in a week.

TRAUMATIC

It's the little things that are important in **RED ORCHESTRA 2: HEROES OF STALINGRAD** *by Graham Smith*

Red Orchestra 2 is the best murder simulator I've ever played. It's not the best first-person shooter, or multiplayer game, or even team-based multiplayer game. It's certainly not the best World War II game, and its single-player is the worst I've played in years. But in the killing, and in the being killed, *Red Orchestra 2* is a terrifying and satisfying experience.

Let's talk about you for a minute. You're a soldier in either Hitler's or Stalin's army and you are scared. You've got your back against the wall in a room with one door, two windows, and three walls, and you're peeking around a corner into the building's exposed core. Every room could conceal an enemy soldier, and you've died a hundred times, always from that one angle you didn't check.

Looking down through the rubble, you see an enemy soldier break from behind a wall. You aim and fire.

You've shot him and now he's dead. It is exactly like a million other games, but it feels nothing like any other game. It's the little things that make the difference, like the sound of your own breathing when you lifted the rifle to your face, and the way it bobbed slightly in your hands. It's in the mark on your enemy's chest where the bullet hit, and the way his blood spritzed from his back, marking that bullet's exit. It's in the *way* he fell, forced by some terrible weight. It's the way he clutched his stomach, yelling in Russian, or the way he fired his machinegun madly during his last few seconds of life.

At some point, the developers of *Red Orchestra 2* realized that if the primary interaction in your game is *killing*, then you should probably make the killing feel incredible. It's this attention to detail that lifts up what is an otherwise ordinary game: a slightly more realistic *Battlefield*, with Soviets fighting Nazis across mother Russia.

Take the game modes, for example. The most popular is Territory, in which one team starts in control of a map's capturable points and the other team must take them. In this mode, reinforcements spawn every 20 seconds or so, and on maps designed to support 64 players, it does a fine job of focusing attention towards the shifting frontline. But it did the same thing in *Battlefield 2*, where it was called Conquest mode. Countdown mode has similar attack/defend objectives, but players get just one life per round, and the teams swap sides midway. No one is currently playing it. The third mode is Firefight, a team deathmatch variant that's popular, but feels like it's missing the point of *Red Orchestra*.

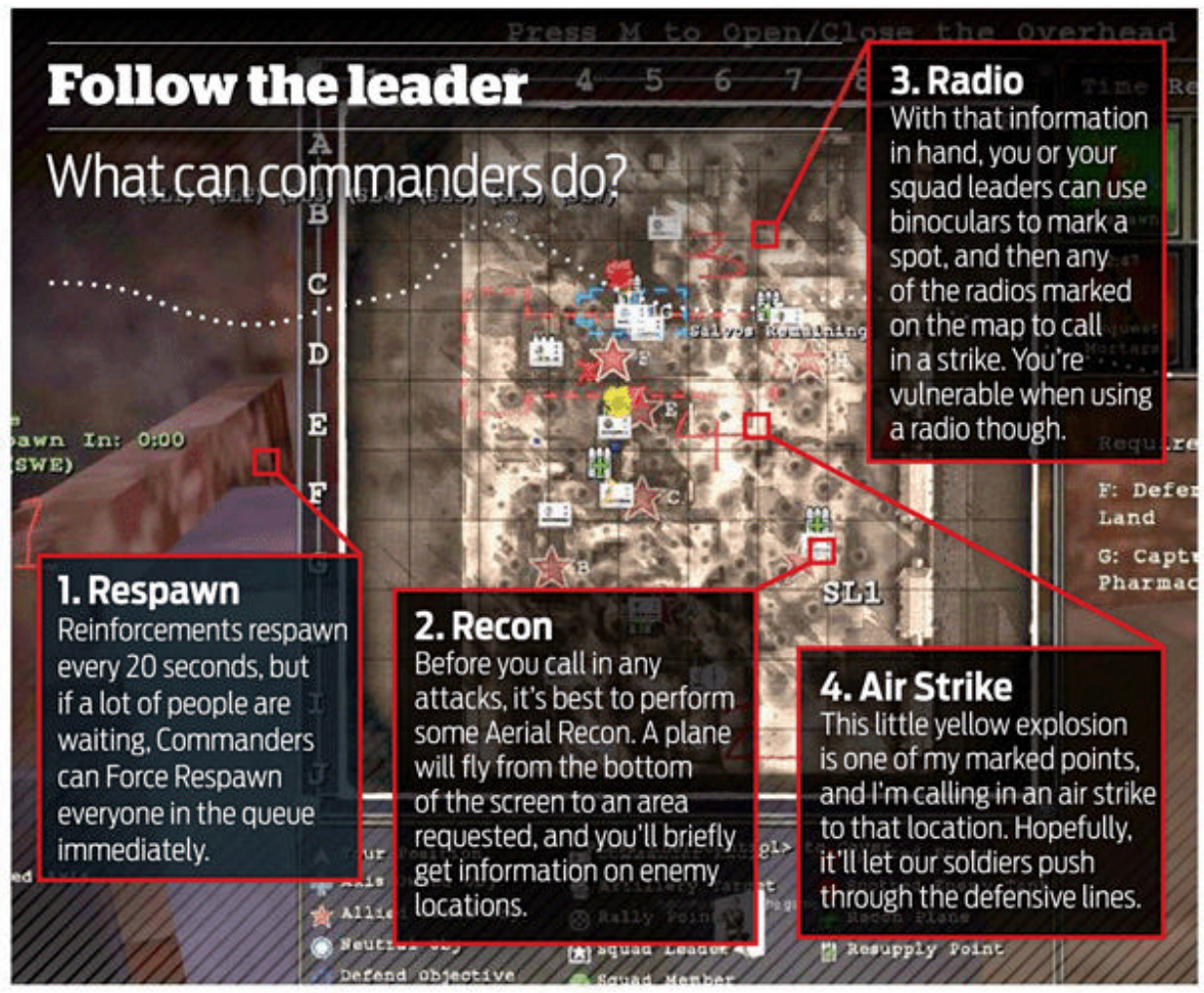
Sudden death

While the weapons themselves feel remarkable, the classes that carry them are similarly familiar. There's the Assault class with a submachinegun, the Marksman with a sniper rifle, the Rifleman and Elite Rifleman, and a few others. The attempt to add flavor, in the form of Squad Leaders and Commanders, does little to change the flow of battle. Both roles have valuable abilities, but nobody follows orders on public servers.

Even tanks don't add much to the experience. They require a whole different set of skills to use well, but they feel like an easily ignored nuisance on the few maps that include them. On any server I've ever joined, the one tank-only map is the moment in the war where everyone disappears to write letters home to their mothers.

Let's be clear: none of these things are necessarily bad, they're just not why *Red Orchestra 2* is great. Ignore how dull the idea of another "World War II shooter" sounds, and look to the experiences *RO2* provides. Again, it's the little things that have kept me playing it for 25 hours in a week.

It's creeping through the ruined buildings of Pavlov's House, one of the best maps, and jumping every time I see a piece of paper float through the air. It's the time I



rounded a corner to come face to face with a Nazi holding a grenade above his head, bayoneted him in the stomach, and then dove down some stairs to escape the blast. It's the thrill of sprinting across an open field, enemy machinegun fire whizzing all around me.

Death in *RO2* is so sudden and violent that you're constantly on edge, an experience exacerbated by all the pieces of information the game is keeping from you.

Fog of war

At a distance, there's no easy way to tell if a soldier is on your side. The uniforms are distinct, but not the fluorescent green cycling jackets you need on a smoky battlefield. If you're close to someone, looking at him, and he's on your side, then his name will appear, but you often don't have that kind of time.

There's also no instant kill confirmation. You'll be fighting across the ruined tenements on the wonderful Pavlov's House map, and you'll spot a head in a window across the street. From the shape of the helmet you'll infer it's an enemy, and fire. The head will disappear frm view. Is he dead? Did you miss? Is it safe to move on? You can only hope.

Wherever it can, *RO2* makes murky what other games want clear. There's no ammo display on the HUD. You have to check the barrel for a rough estimate, or count your own shots. Realism mode, which is activated on roughly half of the servers currently running, removes certainty altogether by eliminating friendly names, kill confirmations, and the entire radar. It doesn't make a huge difference, but I had more fun in non-realism mode.

The heart-stopping adrenaline you feel in front of your PC is mirrored in the soldier you're controlling. When you stand at a window and bullets start to chip against the frame, all the color drains from the screen, the world blurs, and your aim becomes worse than a drunk teenager in a nightclub bathroom. You need to get out of there to catch your breath, like the person who enters the bathroom after the teenager. It's a smart way to stop camping.

All this attention to detail hasn't prevented the game from being miserably broken. Connecting to a server frequently pops me to a team selection screen where the buttons don't work. The server browser only refreshes once, meaning you have to restart the game to try again.

If I do successfully connect to a server, the bugs don't stop. Sometimes when I die, I'm unable to respawn till I re-select my class. The XP system, which is supposed to reward you with new weapons, is completely broken, and the Steam achievements system will often reward you with things you haven't done. At least once every two hours, on two different PCs, the game will crash entirely.

It's like buying a beautiful dining table from eBay, having your friend help you carry it up two flights of stairs, and then discovering it has death watch beetles pupating inside it. Tripwire says it is aware of the issues and I'm confident it will fix them, but right now, the problems make playing a chore.

Less likely to be fixed any time soon are the German and Soviet single-player "campaigns," which amount to nothing more than multiplayer matches with bots, connected by brief, animated history lessons. They would be fine, but the bot AI is stupider than the larvae tunnelling under my dinner plates.

Let's make a list. The AI soldiers are blind and will run directly past soldiers on the enemy team without firing. They're cripplingly indecisive, and will leap in and out of the same window over and over. If an enemy is close enough, he'll try to engage you in melee combat, but if you run backward, he'll chase you interminably and never fire.

I've seen machinegunners set up with their backs to the enemy. I've seen machinegunners set up on top of kitchen cabinets, facing a wall. I've seen soldiers run in infinite circles, unable to navigate a corner. I've seen enemy tanks drive endlessly into walls, and crash in front of me without ever firing.

The single-player option appears at the top of the main menu, and it provides a terrible introduction for newcomers to the game. The single-player should not have been released. Ignore it.

But don't ignore the game. By perfecting a lot of tiny, gruesome details, its developers have created an experience where killing a man is as satisfying as getting a tetris, and when I close my eyes, I'm still firing rifles in my head. ■

I've seen enemy tanks crash in front of me without ever firing.

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Tripwire Interactive ◆ **Developer** Tripwire Interactive
◆ **Multiplayer** 64 players online ◆ **Link** www.heroesofstalingrad.com ◆ **ESRB** M

VERDICT

Satisfying, suspenseful multiplayer is more than the sum of its parts, but marred by bugs for now. Ignore the single-player.

PC GAMER 78

Weapons classes have a familiar feel.

Death is never far away in *Red Orchestra 2*.

You can fight for Hitler or Stalin—tough bosses.

Rarely has brutal killing been so very enjoyable.

It's not always easy to tell friend from foe.

The devil's in the detail—and the lack of information.

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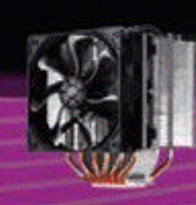

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CLANDESTINY

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2—RISE OF THE SAMURAI

is as seductive as a rank six Shirabyoshi *by Tim Stone*

Need to know

What is it?
A healthy add-on that shifts *Shogun 2* from the 16th to the 12th century

Influenced by
The Tale of the Heike

Play it on
Total War: Shogun 2

Alternatively
Sengoku (71%)

Copy protection
Steam

Should a *Shogun 2* supplement centered on the Genpei War of 1180-1185 feature a comprehensive selection of period units? Before you answer with an eager "Hai!" bear in mind that the Minamoto clan won the pivotal Battle of Kurikara with the aid of stampeding oxen.

There are no war cows in *Rise of the Samurai*, however—in fact this expansion is free of gimmicky bull-ocks/bollocks of all kinds. What you get for your very reasonable 10 bucks is a cartload of new content that leaves *Shogun 2* feeling sushi-fresh.

At the heart of the transformation is a corker of a campaign involving six pleasingly distinct and enticingly unfamiliar playable clans. Vying for control of a re-regioned map of Japan, these clans have their origins in three different families, which means you always start out with one powerful ally nearby. The blood ties aren't indestructible, but the relationship usually lasts long enough to give those early years of expansion a comforting co-op feel.

If sister clans sent the odd "Prepare yourself, I'm about to attack those swines in the east!" missive, and were a bit more attentive when it came to mutual defense, the feeling of companionship would have been even stronger. On a couple of occasions I've watched my empire crumble while sizable allied armies in neighboring provinces sat around on their camping stools.

Pushy Bushi?

What your favorite faction says about you

Kamakura Minamoto
You're kind. You like your enemy to fight in the shade (of thousands of arrows).

Kiso Minamoto
You're so impatient you've probably already skipped onto the next...Hey! Wait!

Kubota Fujiwara
You enjoy poetry, studying, and watching warrior-monks make unholy foes holey.

Hiraizumi Fujiwara
You're sly and greedy. You'd rather bribe and tax your way to victory than fight.

Yashima Taira
Mercantilism and the sea are in your blood. Consult a doctor as soon as possible.

Fukuhara Taira
You enjoy bellowing "We are the Fukuhara and we've come to Fukuover!"

Simpler times

On the battlefield those armies look a lot more rustic and realistic than their base-game equivalents. The 400-year rewind brings a slightly simpler unit mix and far less fancy metal armor and flamboyant pageantry. Ashigaru and matchlock units are out. Cavalry is rarer. Formations are smaller and airier. As the title suggests, versatile bow-and-katana-armed foot samurai are the new skirmish stars. The only units capable of poaching their limelight are the knots of club-wielding Tetsubo monks and the warhorse-spurring Onna Bushi heroines.

Women contribute to the war effort as sly Shirabyoshi, too. These traditional entertainers use poetry and dance (and we won't speculate on anything else) to persuade enemy generals to defect and friendly generals to stay friendly. Picture how crestfallen Creative Assembly's cutscene team must have been on being told agent videos wouldn't be featured in this expansion.

Shirabyoshi share the agent mess room with Metsuke-like Junsatsushi, the Ninja-esque Monomi, and the rabble-rousing Sou. None of these strategy-map wanderers are radically different from their *Shogun 2* prototypes, but there are enough variations to encourage fresh approaches in your strategy. Currently I'm playing as the well-heeled Hiraizumi and doing most of my conquering bloodlessly via the Junsatsushi "switch allegiance" ability. First the agent spends a few turns passively influencing the target region, then a bulging bag of cash is handed over, and—bingo!—the region usually switches sides. It's a very effective tactic. Perhaps *too* effective.

New agents are hired through new structures like the barter house. To unlock these, *RotS*-specific arts trees must be climbed. Don't let anyone tell you this DLC is a lazy cash-in. Creative Assembly has thoroughly Genpei-fied almost every aspect of the game. One of the few areas that hasn't felt the wind of change is the historical battle folder. Anegawa, the one previously unseen scrap, is a *Sengoku*-era affair.

The developer has already been hinting that it has more *Shogun 2* adjuncts up its voluminous kimono sleeves. If the coming packs are as full-featured, historically sensitive, and as transformative as *Rise of the Samurai*, then hang onto your Hattoris—we're in for a treat. ■

At the game's heart is a corker of a campaign.

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Sega ◆ **Developer** Creative Assembly
◆ **Multiplayer** 8 players ◆ **Link** www.totalwar.com/shogun2 ◆ **ESRB** T

VERDICT

A generous, history-respecting rethink that adds weeks of fun to one of 2011's finest strategy titles.

PC GAMER **86**

Kenji's silk armor experiment proved unsuccessful.

The map is prettier than ever and seems gentler on GPUs.

Religion is out. Now family influence is the thing.

The Europe of the 1180s was equally stabby.

No No Dachi doesn't mean no stupidly large swords.

Let's capture the flag!

"A man without sandals is a man without fear." Old Buddhist claptrap.

WRATH-ER GOOD

RAGE is id Software's first new world in 20 years. Worth the wait, or will it just make you angry? ***by Rich McCormick***

Need to know

What is it?
Shooter from the parents of the genre, now with added car driving

Influenced by
Borderlands, Fallout 3

Play it on
Quad-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800/Radeon HD 4200

Alternatively
Bulletstorm (80%)

Copy protection
Steam

For all of its open roads and bright blue skies, for all its sweeping canyons and town hubs, *Rage* is still resolutely an id Software shooter, and no one knows this better than id Software. And despite the apparent differences from id's previous work, *Rage* is the continuation of the corridor.

Rage wakes you up from cryo-sleep as one of the world's last super-soldiers. You've been put in the freezer and sent up to space thanks to both your perceived aptitude at rebuilding societies and your badassitude. But something went a bit wrong. It's 106 years after the mildly explained apocalyptic Bad Thing happened, and the destroyed world has split into rival gangs of mentalist bandits, flesh-eating mutant freaks, evil fascists, and honest folks looking to make a living. It's this latter lot with home you throw your hat-made-of-guns.

Road rage

Rage's missions don't need much explanation: you're sent down into a pit, and once you're in there, there's no talking to the man-monsters that dwell within. Doors are kept conspicuously shut, and missions aren't ever complicated, but they're consistently well paced and imaginative, spotted with the right amount of spectacle and surprises.

Rage's post-apocalyptic wasteland regularly opens out into bowls and basins, making little thunderdomes for the game's car combat. But these sections aren't the norm, just thicker beads on a thread connecting the game's three hub-towns. Driving between these townships is like working through *Rage*'s more typical shootery bits: murder anyone who gets in your way and never stop moving forward. Town hubs provide missions; accept a quest and you'll be given a little marker.

Races—organized by the bored NPCs at each hub—provide a secondary reason to drive. They don't affect the main storyline directly; instead, success in the ranks affords the player more racing credits, which can in turn be pumped into the upkeep and outfit of the car they use in the wasteland.

Get me a gun

The game's shooting feels as good as you'd expect, each weapon blessed with a distinctive bark and kick. Id has jettisoned the modern shooter's neurotic arsenal restrictions, letting players carry nine weapons around on their travels, each safely secreted on a number key. Most have two or more ammunition types, their rarity roughly concurrent with either their usefulness or ridiculousness.

Sadly, there's some artlessly wedged-in console crossover when it comes to controlling the shooting. Creative director Tim Willits argues that *Rage* plays better with a gamepad, which means that for hot-swapping between ammo and weapon types, PC players are stuck with a strange setup that forces us to assign weapons to one of four slots. Ammo can still be switched by cycling, but it adds a user-unfriendly sheen to fights, and makes precise control trickier.

And precision is very important. *Rage*'s mutants and bandits duck as they close in on you—it's almost as if they don't want their brains emptied onto the floor. Only later in the game, as the enemies slather on thicker armor and keep their feet on the ground, do firefights descend into cover leapfrog.

But by that point, I wasn't doing much of my own shooting anyway. *Rage* comes with a crafting system, fed by a mini economy. Recipes can be purchased for various battlefield helpers, and I spent the game's anticlimactic final level letting my robo-chums do my annihilation for me. Both approaches—dirtying your hands and standing back—feel fundamentally satisfying.

Rage isn't a complicated game. Despite what the developers might've suggested and we might've assumed, it's still set in a corridor. Fortunately, id still makes some of the finest corridors in the world. ■

Watch your fingers

How to win at *Rage*'s knife game

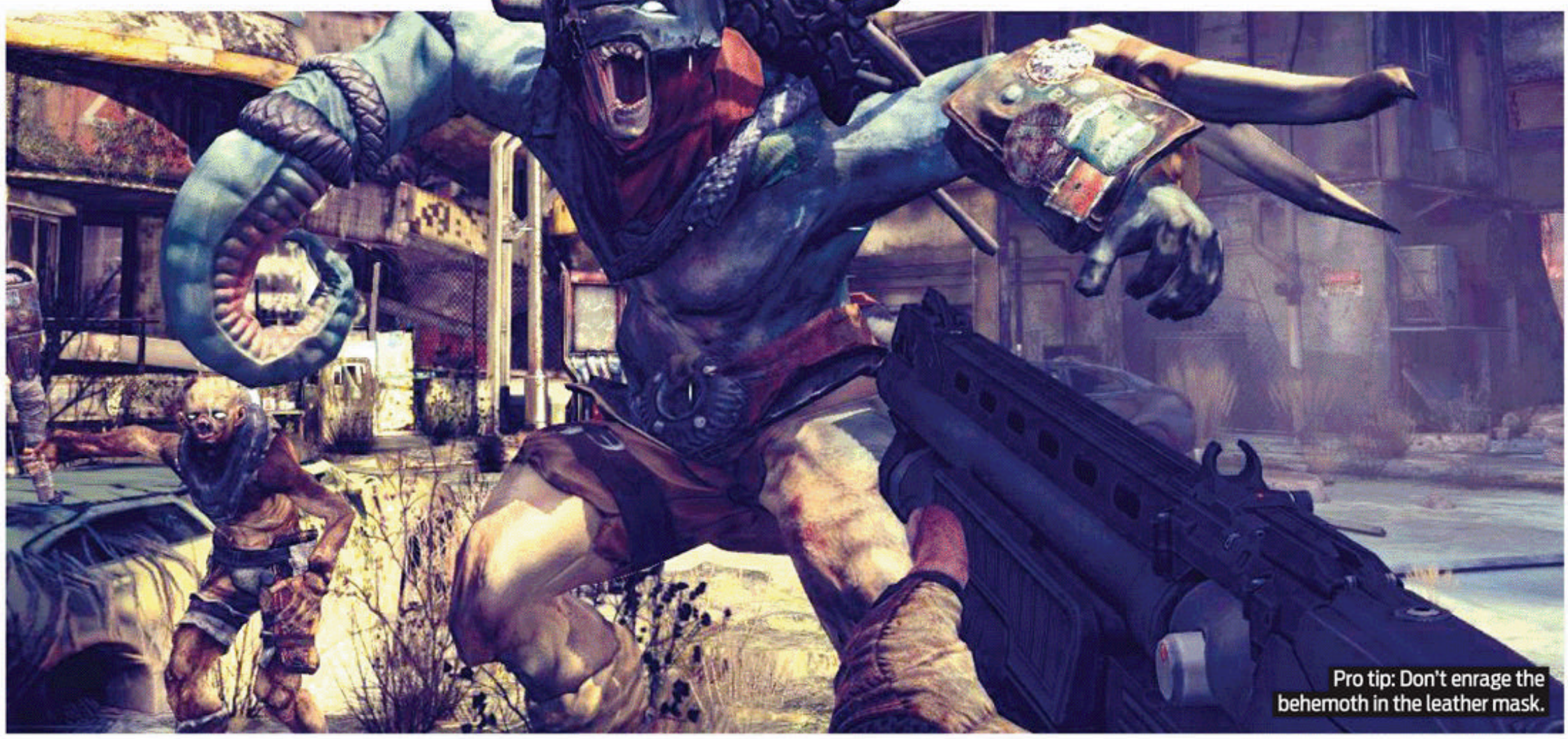
***Rage*'s shooting feels as good as you'd expect.**

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Bethesda ◆ **Developer** id Software
◆ **Multiplayer** 4-player competitive, 2-player co-op ◆ **Link** www.rage.com ◆ **ESRB** M

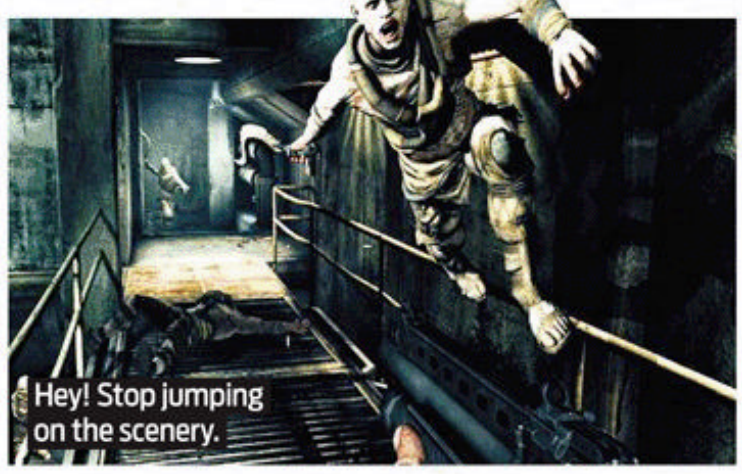
VERDICT

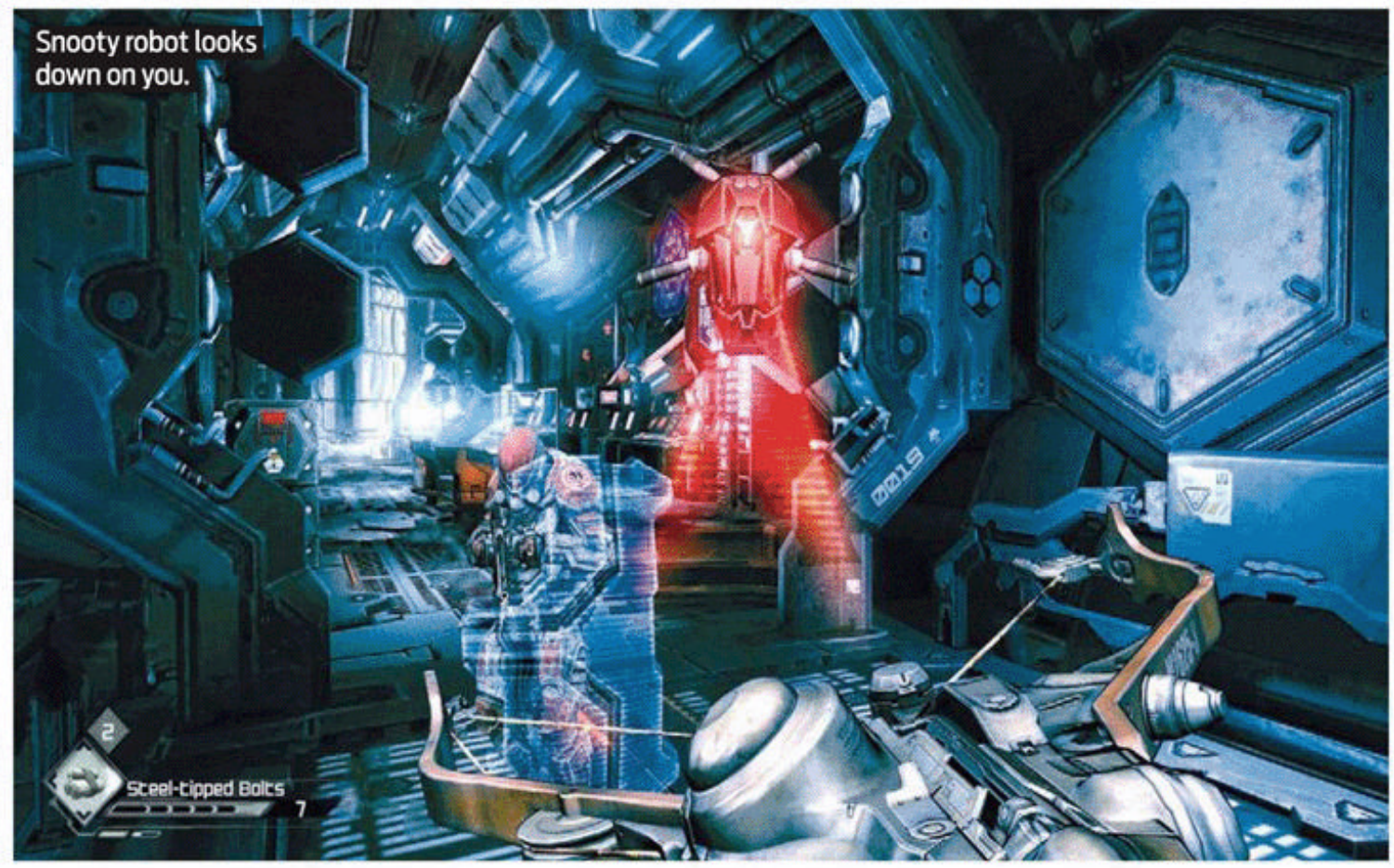
Id hasn't strayed very far from its roots, but it still knows how to make a top-quality shooter. Simple, satisfying fun.

PC GAMER **84**


Pro tip: Don't enrage the behemoth in the leather mask.

Teenage mutant ninja hurt-les.


Hey! Stop jumping on the scenery.



The perils of a bad commute.

Three, two, one, mustache off! Aww, you win.

Cars can use power-ups to regain armor.

The rogue can start uprisings and buy off opposing characters.

The iron throne is mine by rights.

Winter is coming.

When war breaks out, diplomacy stops.

LITTLE AND LESS

Sadism, betrayal, and murderous plotting—let's talk about **A GAME OF THRONES: GENESIS**

by Dan Griliopolous

Need to know

What is it?
A strategy game that takes place in the setting for the *Song of Ice and Fire* series

Influenced by
The books of George RR Martin

Play it on
Dual-core 2.2GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 6600 GT/Radeon X1600 XT

Alternatively
Age of Mythology (86%)

Copy Protection
Steam

Based on the *Song of Ice and Fire* novels by George RR Martin, *Game of Thrones* should make for a perfect strategy game. The books are about lethal plots against foes, arrogant nobles fighting endless wars, and the suffering populace of a world that fails to recognize the undead threat coming with the long winter. Oh, and dragons. Having included all of those elements, how could *Genesis* fail?

Well, by not capturing that feel at all. The core RTS element has a structure as traditional as *Age of Empires II*: the single-player campaign tracks, somewhat tediously, through the lightly sketched history of Westeros. The missions are varied, but most are plodding, with characters about as strong as a paper bag and missions traipsing around arbitrary paths on 2D maps.

So how does *GoT* work? There are two types of resource structure. You can ally with towns or castles, and you'll create merchants to bring you gold. That gold can then be used to hire social agents or mercenaries. Meanwhile, peasants work on the fields to create food. As players perform ill-defined aggressive actions, a ticker at the screen's top tells you how near you are to war. It's a nice idea, but not mechanically obvious.

Once you have an excess of food, it can be used to raise armies, which are slightly more specialized mercenary units. Each house has a specialization and special unit, but despite this variety, combat is mostly messy and the unit AI is poor.

It's lucky, then, that the core of the game is subterfuge. Each player has a range of agents, bought with gold, with a variety of talents. These agents can be used to acquire territory, scout, protect other agents, and generally confuse the issue of who's winning. All of these tools are fun to use, but in larger levels the micromanagement swiftly becomes overwhelming, and it's not always clear whether what you're doing is relevant to your success.

The multiplayer skirmish mode—called House to House—is the purest form of the game. The Houses (which are the famous families from the books like Stark or Lannister) need to build up prestige to win. It's this mode and only this mode that's worth playing.

However, as a single-player experience, this isn't great. It's messy, slow without being clear, graphically not cutting edge, and the loooong campaign just isn't compelling enough. The skirmish mode would be a lot more fun, but all of these espionage tools are no use without a real person to use them on, which is what multiplayer's for. And, like we knew already, that's the only way to play the *Game of Thrones*. ■

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive ◆ **Developer** Cyanide
◆ **Multiplayer** 8 players ◆ **Link** www.agot-genesis.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

VERDICT

When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die—there is no middle ground. Unfortunately, this dies.

PC GAMER **62**

LAST GASP

COD: BLACK OPS—REZURRECTION serves up cold, leftover zombies *by Tom Senior*

Whatever our memories of *Call of Duty*, the zombie survival mode introduced by Treyarch in *World at War* has frequently been the best part of the regular *Call of Duty: Black Ops* packs. It follows, then, that a DLC pack made up of five zombie levels should be the best of the packs. And it is—but not by much.

Moon is the centerpiece. You and three friends start out in a facility in Area 51, and within minutes zombie swarms will force you to take the teleporter to the lunar surface, where you'll find yourself in low gravity, gasping for air until you can find an HEV mask. Low gravity is brilliant.

The other four maps are almost identical versions of the *World at War* zombie maps that *Black Ops* Limited Edition

owners have been playing for months. The ruined house of Nacht Under Toten and the gloomy swamps of Shi No Numa represent the zombies in their most boring form. The huge Tesla coils of experimental Nazi facility in Der Reise are more fun, and Verruckt is the best of this batch. However, it's telling that the best of the *Black Ops* DLC packs is 80 percent recycled material. ■

PC GAMER 50

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Activision ◆ **Developer** Treyarch
◆ **Multiplayer** 4-player co-op ◆ **Link** www.callofduty.com/blackops ◆ **ESRB** M

LEAVING LAS VEGAS

The Courier's final delivery is to FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS—LONESOME ROAD *by Richard Cobbett*

Lonesome Road is an almost relentlessly linear trudge from one side of a rubble-strewn canyon to the other: there are few side quests, very few secrets to discover, and little to distract you from the constant attacks by mutants and monsters at every step. Instead of going out on a big, adventurous high, *Lonesome Road* is practically a *Fallout* FPS, not the role-playing action *New Vegas* does best.

So why are you on this suicidal quest? During the main *New Vegas* storyline, you discovered that your unlucky courier wasn't the one meant to deliver Mr. House's Platinum Chip. The man who was, Ulysses, passed on the job so that you'd get the unfortunate assignment. *Lonesome Road* is the story of why he set you on the path to being shot in

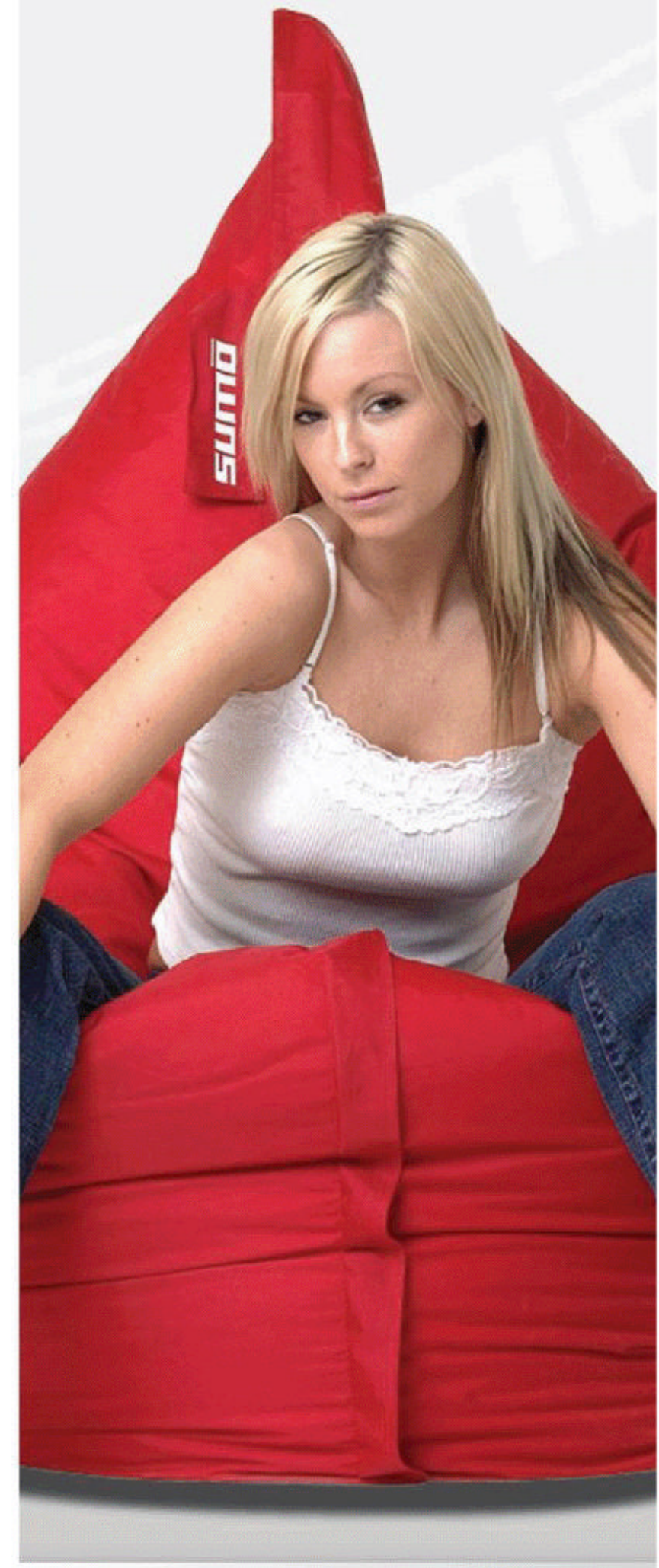
the head and left for dead, and why he's still nursing a grudge. Ulysess' motivations are reasonable, but he comes across as pretentious, jabbering bore.

And that's about all you get, aside from a few new toys, some forgettable items, and another unnecessary boost to the level cap. None are particularly vital or justify the expense if you haven't already rushed to buy this. ■

PC GAMER 53

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Bethesda ◆ **Developer** Obsidian
◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** www.falloutnewvegas.com ◆ **ESRB** M

sumō
Urban Lounge Gear
www.sumolounge.com



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ROUNDABOUT

TRACKMANIA 2: CANYON is all new, except the parts that are as brilliant, baffling, and broken as before ***by Duncan Harris***

Need to know

What is it?
Time-trial arcade racer with genre-defining UGC component

Influenced by
Stunt Car Racer, stunts

Play it on
1.5GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, Nvidia Ion/Radeon HD 6310

Copy protection
Internet connection for solo/multiplayer races

If you've played *TrackMania* before, you'll know that a typical race doesn't end at the finish, but rather somewhere in the melee of often disastrous, occasionally awesome time trial attempts. Everyone in a session races with one another, but only ever against the clock. They learn from mistakes that send cars bouncing off the approaching scenery—and boy, do they bounce. Playing *TrackMania*, however, is only one-third of the game. Most players spend equal portions of time creating (tracks, cars, music, minigames) and sharing (via in-game personal storefronts, forums, YouTube).

So what does it mean when a game that's been updated plenty of times already decides to call itself a sequel? If you ask developer Nadeo, it means the start of a new adventure. *TrackMania 2: Canyon* includes just a single terrain type, a single car/handling model, and a single "pure" racing mode. The changes are seemingly few, but in a game of degrees and milliseconds, even minor changes can feel huge.

The handling is no longer that of a toy racer. The new car is heavier, throatier, and it drifts *big-time*. The tracks feel more natural, the cars more animal. Is it better? Try "different"—like *Stunt Car Racer* meets Daytona. The Canyon, for a place made of pluggable building blocks, is magnificent. It's a static environment, too, which means that it's all pre-calculated by the track editor.

Explanation, please

TrackMania appeals to my inner geek with all its outward-facing technology. If I want to take a screenshot, I can spend hours on the camera angle, or on adjusting the replay timeline of every car. I can build and paint cars, and then earn myself some Planets, the game's new virtual currency. The problem, however, is that I need someone who can show me how to do this stuff.

Being a community-driven game by a small studio, *TM2* has no manual. Instead it has a wiki, but it begs more questions than it answers. Part of the problem is that Nadeo is so active in its community that it thinks that all players understand what's going on. A major change to how official time trials work, for instance, was left a mystery for new players. As with older games in the series, large portions of its interface are just links to websites and forums.

Don't get me wrong: *TM2* is a beautiful racing game. I could tell you just what speed of footage creates just what kind of motion blur, and the advantage of using a Hermite-interpolated custom camera. I am a proud TrackManiac. But this game is not for everyone, and I'm not sure it's enough.

Obviously there's a whole lot more to come for *TrackMania 2*, but basics like the interface should have been immaculate, or at the very least presentable. It should have had tutorials and pop-ups springing up for every mode. It should have been bug-free and user-friendly. It should have been conquering the world. ■

◆ Price $25 **◆ Release** Out now **◆ Publisher** Ubisoft **◆ Developer** Nadeo **◆ Multiplayer** 20 players **◆ Link** www.maniaplanet.com **◆ ESRB** NR

VERDICT

Almost everything you'd want of a *TrackMania*, but maybe not as much of a *TrackMania 2*. It could have been so much more.

PC GAMER **83**

MIGHTY MASSACRE

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Build a better monster trap in **ORCS MUST DIE!**, then improve it *by Rob Zacny*

Orcs Must Die! has achieved something I'd thought practically impossible: it's a great tower-defense game that actually becomes deeper and more rewarding the longer you play it. The joy comes not just from the sadistic delight of watching a wall trap viciously filet a crowd of almost-lovable cartoon orcs with a series of spinning blades, but also the *Portal*-like cycle of running into a tricky problem, taking a break while you ponder it, and then racing back to try a new solution.

The first time through the early levels I only had a few tools, but I've unlocked at least a dozen different traps and special powers since then. Spiked pressure plates are all well and good, but a spring trap that launches flailing orcs into pools of lava is more stylish—and I delight in the cruel irony of a push trap that shoves surviving orcs back into the same gauntlet of traps they just escaped.

Traps are the most fun way to dispatch orcs, but using my War Mage to slay, shoot, and fry them in third-person view is often the difference between victory and defeat. I don't much like his fratboy attitude, but he's a very effective and essential last line of defense.

What really distinguishes *Orcs Must Die!* is that its levels defy easy solutions, and those solutions change as you bring more advanced traps and powers back from the later levels. It is a continually enjoyable challenge that does not pale with experience, but actually grows richer. Not since *Lemmings* has a game so seamlessly mixed humor, cuteness, and cruelty. ■

PC GAMER 90

Batting clean-up on whatever orcs survive the gauntlet.

The wall trap made me ask, "Am I really the good guy?"

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Robot Entertainment ◆ **Developer** Robot Entertainment ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** bit.ly/orcsmustdie ◆ **ESRB** T

ALSO RAN

SENGOKU can be fun, once you can figure out what's going on *by Dan Griliopolous*

You can start as almost any lord in this neat slice of feudal conquest simulation. Opt to be one of the greats, like the Uesgi and Hotokawa clans with tens of vassals, or choose the most minor lord isolated far off Japan's coast, with responsibility to a great chain of lieges and about as much chance of becoming Shogun as Carrot Top.

What the game doesn't tell you is...well, a lot. You're told that you need to get 50 percent of the country to be Shogun, but Paradox seems to have eschewed a tutorial for an in-game help system, which explains the interface as you click on it, without revealing much of the core mechanics. For example, honor is one of the game's key concepts, necessary to keep vassals happy. But the game doesn't tell you what constitutes "low" honor, and it's not always clear what the honor cost of an action is.

Both you and the AI can take part in plots, scheming against your enemies, allies and overlords—and you. One character selects the target and invites other players to join; once a plot has enough backing, you can release it. When the system works, it's spectacular, though beyond this, diplomacy is rather lightweight.

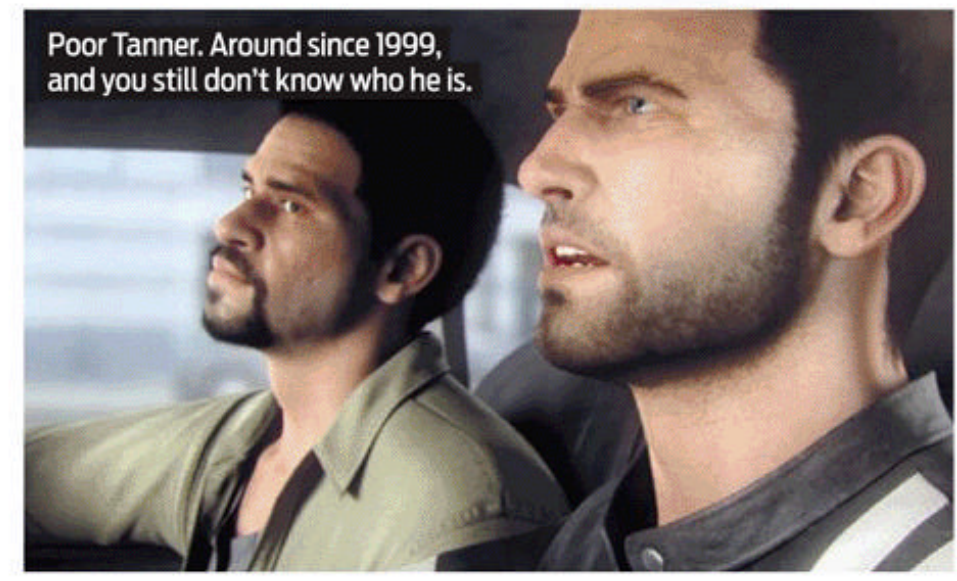
There's no tech tree in *Sengoku*, and combat is rudimentary, with the largest army normally winning. The simple building system is very slow and expensive, often taking years, and enemy ninjas can destroy guilds or religious locations with ease. But the actual map of Japan is great, packing in lots of easily digestible information. ■

PC GAMER 71

Attack of the 50-foot samurai.

The diplomacy AI isn't that great.

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Paradox ◆ **Developer** Paradox ◆ **Multiplayer** 12 players ◆ **Link** www.paradoxplaza.com ◆ **ESRB** T



DREAM CAR

Reality ends up twistier than Lombard Street in **DRIVER: SAN FRANCISCO** *by Richard Cobbett*

Need to know

What is it?
Driving meets out-of-body weirdness, carving out its own niche in the shadow of *GTA* and friends

Influenced by
Life on Mars

Play it on
Dual-core 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8600 GT/ Radeon HD 2600 XT

Alternatively
Test Drive Unlimited 2 (90%)

Copy Protection
Online check on load

Deep within a coma dream, Tanner floors his imaginary gas pedal and begins the chase. The suspect in the red SUV desperately weaves in and out of traffic, but if he's hoping the risk of civilian casualties will somehow keep him safe, he's in the wrong car chase. As the suspect hits the freeway, he shifts out of his body and becomes a floating, ethereal spirit, possessing the body of a truck driver coming the other way and turning it into a high-speed battering ram.

And later, things get a bit odd.

Driver: San Francisco is one of the weirdest driving games ever, in the best possible way. It's *Life on Mars* turned into a wheelman's wet dream. Tanner's ability to shift between cars at will takes a series that's previously been very straight-laced and makes it constantly fun, funny, and chaotic.

Tanner's enthusiasm for doing this is infectious, and the fact that he's temporarily possessing drivers instead of simply their cars makes for great in-game chatter from other terrified passengers. For example, in one mission Tanner torments a boy-racer by leaping into him and forcing him to smash into cops. If all this wasn't openly presented as a dream, Tanner would be the biggest jerk this side of *Saints Row 2*. Instead, you can enjoy the ride, guilt-free.

It can be a bumpy ride, though, especially on PC. This isn't a great port, starting with the fact that it quite obviously is one. Graphically, it's unimpressive, and there are no real options beyond switching anti-aliasing on or off. The biggest annoyance, though, is that the controls are completely designed around having a controller with analog sticks, and trying to play with keyboard and mouse is a recipe for insanity. You're also stuck with Ubisoft's nasty DRM, which demands an online check when you first fire up the game, though at least lets you play offline after that.

Even with a controller, the actual driving is usually mediocre, with poor handling in most of the vehicles and very rubber-banded races. Very rarely do you come across a particularly difficult mission, which keeps the story humming along, but it makes the occasional spikes all the more noticeable when they do show up. Without its people-shifting element, *Driver: San Francisco* would be enjoyable-enough mediocrity, but it wouldn't be anything special next to other driving games.

With shifting, though, it's one of the most enjoyable racing games in a very long time. Gimmicky or not, there's a gleeful purity to *Driver*'s action, from its lack of gun battles and on-foot action, to the way it soon convinces you that magically weaponizing oncoming traffic can be as natural as a handbrake turn. ■

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Reflections Interactive
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.driver-thegame.com ◆ **ESRB** T

VERDICT

Hardly the drive of your life, but easily one of the most memorable—and a great one-time gimmick done well.

PC GAMER **80**

BOULDER DASH

Genre-bending **ROCK OF AGES** gathers no moss *by Tom Hatfield*

Nothing is sacred to *Rock of Ages*—anything that stops your rock from rolling to the end of the course will be flattened.

Play sessions have two phases. In the first, you build towers and catapults to keep the enemy's rock away from the gate that protects your character. In the second, you roll your boulder around or through the enemy's defenses to squish his leader.

The rolling game is the most fun by far. You're in direct control of the rock, and carefully guiding the boulder around, over, or through defenses is where the real challenge lies. However, *Rock of Ages* crumbles in that first, strategic defense-building phase. In theory it's the more thoughtful, tactical side of the game, with a whole variety of towers, animals, and siege weaponry to deploy. The problem is that you only get a narrow window of time to place defenses before your boulder is unleashed. Multiplayer opponents are smarter and require more thought, but more often than not, games end in a straight race between two rolling stones.

What will keep you coming back is the brilliant silliness of it all. *Rock of Ages* takes you on a tour through art history, having boulder-based battles with a variety of historical figures, from King Leonidas to Leonardo da Vinci.

Rock of Ages provides a few hours of fun, and the unique flavor and hilarious cutscenes are worth the budget price tag, but don't expect it to hold up to repeated playthroughs. This is a game about smashing up artwork with a big rock, and there's nothing wrong with that. ■

PC GAMER 75

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Atlus USA ◆ **Developer** ACE Team
◆ **Multiplayer** 2 players ◆ **Link** www.atlus.com/rockofages ◆ **ESRB** E 10+

CITY SLICKER

DEMOLITION, INC. razes cities and raises spirits *by Tim Stone*

A speeding sedan hits a puddle of green goop, careens off the road, and plows a wall. The gouged building topples. Rubble slumps into the street below, crushing several passing vehicles. A chunk of masonry bounces across six lanes of blacktop and strikes a carefully placed cow. The cow explodes, detonating a fuel tanker. Caught in the fiery blast, three more apartment blocks collapse. Mission completed.

To actively dislike this surprisingly cerebral puzzle game, you'd need to actively dislike watching cars skid, buildings collapse, and cows explode. To put it another way: the only people that won't enjoy *Demolition, Inc.* are elderly nuns, earthquake survivors, and humorless Hindus.

Conquering the 16 levels requires thoughtful placement of oil slicks, glue puddles, and exploding cows. You'll also need a dash of arcade skill. In your flying saucer's armory (you're an extraterrestrial sent to Earth to erase its cities), there are usually a few steering wheels. Activate one, and an automobile of your choosing can be manually guided into a volatile barrel/bovine.

Direct destruction also comes courtesy of unlockable superweapons. Giant steerable wrecking balls and hand-placed earthquake bombs are the WMDs of the intergalactic demolition business.

A challenge mode extends the shelf life of this strategy snack, but its appeal is likely wear thin after a few days of happy hooliganism. For true longevity, this game needed a random level generator and maybe multiplayer mayhem too. That could've been amazing. ■

PC GAMER 74

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Zeroscale ◆ **Developer** Zeroscale
◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** bit.ly/n8uUr7 ◆ **ESRB** NR

CTRL-ALT-DEFEAT

The future takes a brief trip back to the '90s in **HARD RESET** *by Richard Cobbett*

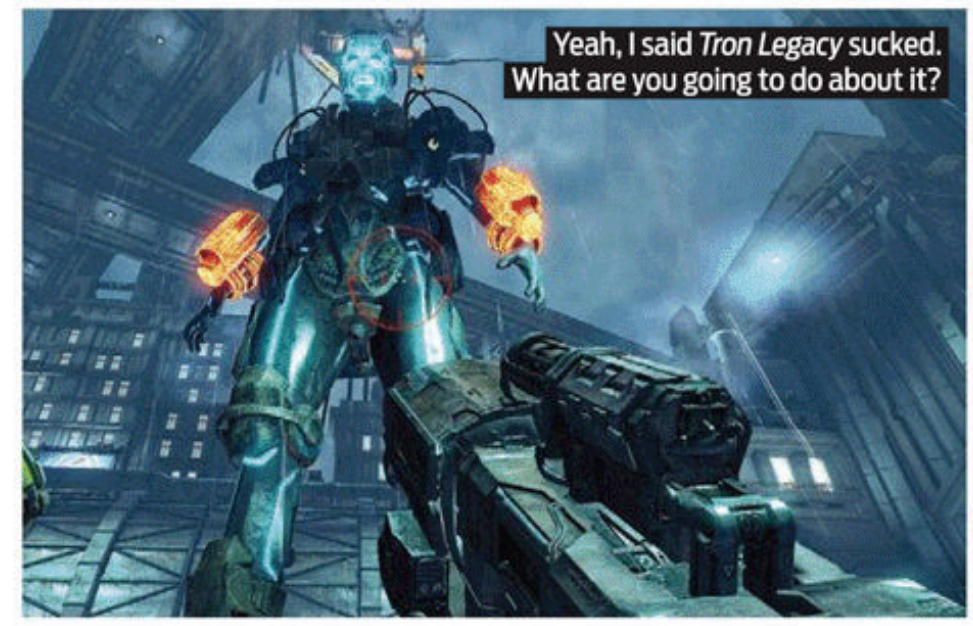
Hard Reset isn't just a reference to what you're expected to do to the killer robots infesting the city, but what the developer tries to do to shooter design itself. It's a back-to-basics game in a shiny modern engine, not so much throwing out things like moral choices and fancy physics puzzles as declaring them officially irrelevant.

There's a bit more plot than that, but it's not worth worrying about. Beyond "shooting stuff," I really couldn't tell you what I was doing for most of the game. Luckily, it's a better shooter than storyteller. Weapons and explosions have terrific weight, with enemies attacking in hordes instead of just a couple of tough guys at a time. Ammo is plentiful, as is health, but that doesn't mean you won't be seeing your own splattery death a lot.

As good as this feels, though, it doesn't take long to get repetitive. There are very few enemy types, and none of them require any more advanced tactics than dodging a charge or switching to a rocket launcher to hit a boss' brightly glowing weak points. On Normal difficulty, I polished off the campaign in an afternoon and was left with no incentive to replay it, and there's no multiplayer.

If it were a one-of-a-kind game, the nostalgia factor might be enough to compensate. Unfortunately for *Hard Reset*, it has company from *Painkiller*, *Bulletstorm*, and *Serious Sam 3*. In comparison with any of them, its back-to-basics charm feels firmly in tech-demo territory—albeit good tech, and with great combat for the short while it lasts. ■

PC GAMER **58**



◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Flying Hog ◆ **Developer** Flying Hog ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.hardresetgame.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

BAD TRIP

Crime really doesn't pay in **CALL OF JUAREZ: THE CARTEL** *by Tom Senior*

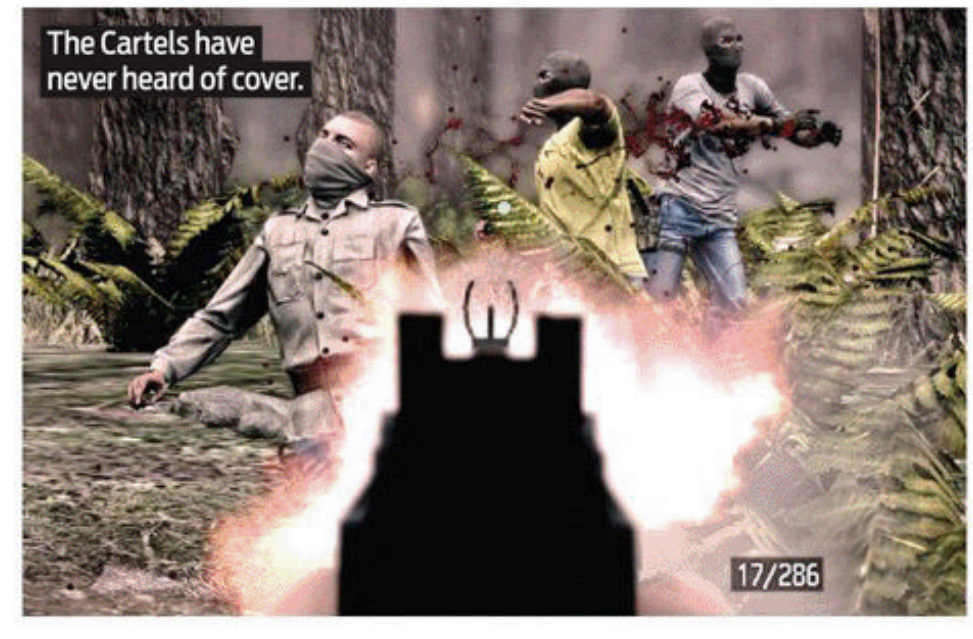
Call of Juarez: The Cartel puts you in control of one of three corrupt law enforcement officers charged with protecting a former drug official's daughter. There's the dual-wielding jerk, the shotgun jerk, and the jerk at the back with a rifle. All three roll through each mission, eliminating hordes of heavily armed drug dealers and the occasional helicopter, every kill earning you points that can then be used to buy better weapons at the start of the next level.

The modern-day setting is brainless, generic, and devoid of personality. The engine is capable of throwing out environments of notable scale, but they're always painfully linear wide corridors full of pop-up drug fiends.

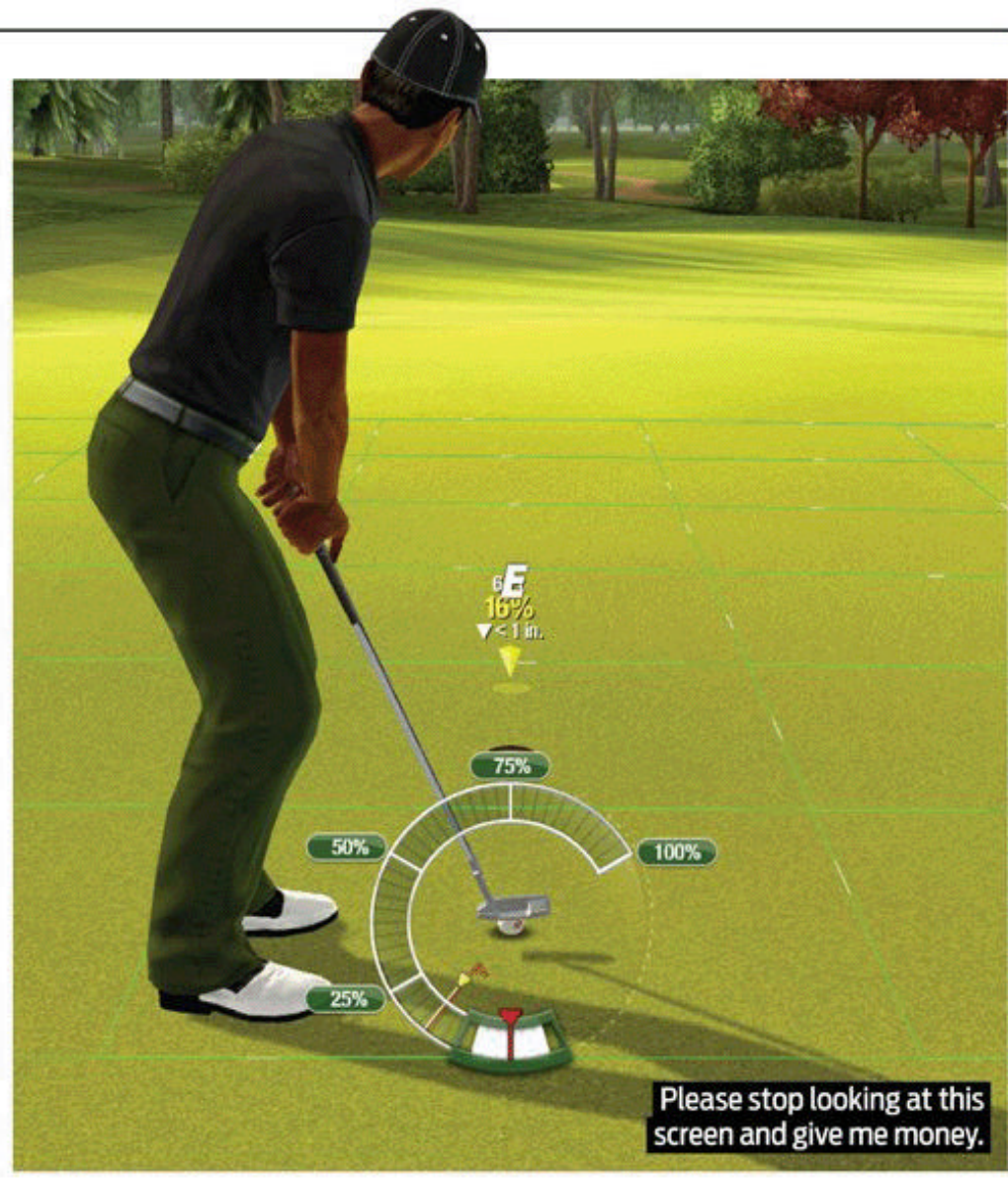
The most interesting additions are the secret missions, which are delivered by cell phone and involve picking something up while no one's looking. If a teammate sees you, he gets the experience instead. It's a great idea designed to add extra spice to the three-player co-op, but dull objectives and poor execution ruin it. Phone calls slow you to a crawl so your horrible character can swear down the mouthpiece for a few minutes.

There's nothing worse than seeing that phone loom into view as you're throwing a grenade at some bad guys. Even as the fire pours in, your out-of-control character pushes the phone into his own face to read a text message, and then texts back as the world explodes around him. *The Cartel*'s finest feature is a mess. Everything else is merely bland, repetitive, and dull. ■

PC GAMER **35**



◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Techland ◆ **Multiplayer** 3-player co-op ◆ **Link** bit.ly/eQ5vbC ◆ **ESRB** M



Please stop looking at this screen and give me money.

Lens flare. Really? *Really?*

The backscratching minigame is excellent.

SHAFTED

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 12: THE MASTERS
is a good game spoiled ***by Craig Pearson***

The game loads up and *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters* tells me that I can now purchase *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters*. Is this *Inception*-like advertising an evil way of getting confused customers to buy infinite copies, or just endemic of the laziness behind EA's latest golf-sim update?

It's a bit of both. It's an offline version of EA's *Tiger Woods Online* game, built using the browser-friendly engine Unity, which enables players to compete in the online Masters tournament and exhibition matches without the fear of slicing it in front of people. It still hooks into the subscription-based *Tiger Woods Online*, and I don't think I've ever played a clumsier attempt to integrate offline and online.

I was contentedly chipping my way to a par in a Masters' game (the golf's still decent, if unchanged since *TWO* launched in 2010) when I was warned I had 10 minutes to save or lose my progress. I ignored it, assuming it was a general message to the entire server, as I was playing offline. The same pop-up appeared at five and two minutes before stopping the game and kicking me back to the desktop. When I tried to return to my offline game, it wouldn't allow me access.

When *Tour 12* did allow reconnection, I poked around online and discovered something sickening: this game doesn't even have a dedicated online mode. It has a three-month membership to *Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online*, and after that you'll have to pay. That's on top of the $40 this glorified demo costs in the first place.

There might be a good model for a subscription-based golf game out there, but even when this was free-to-play the cost was too high. Now that it's saddled with a price tag, a bare minimum of polish, and one new course, I'm not even sure just telling you to avoid it is enough. As it stands, EA is already giving refunds to people who feel ripped off by what they bought. The publisher hoped to use the connectivity of the PC to fill its pockets, but in the end it was that connectivity that brought forums and websites together to demand they do better. I can only get behind those dissatisfied customers. Don't let EA get away with this. Don't buy the game, and tell them this isn't good enough. ■

PC GAMER 15

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** EA Sports ◆ **Developer** EA Sports
◆ **Multiplayer** 4-player rounds, multiplayer tournaments ◆ **Link** www.tigerwoodsonline.ea.com ◆ **ESRB** E

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made, and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★
A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Bastion (92%)
December 2011

Limbo (92%)
November 2011

Deus Ex: Human Revolution (94%)
October 2011

Jamestown: Legend of the Lost Colony (90%)
October 2011

Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition (92%)
October 2011

Frozen Synapse (87%)
September 2011

Portal 2 (94%)
June 2011

DCS: A-10C Warthog (92%)
June 2011

Crysis 2 (89%)
May 2011

Shogun 2: Total War (92%)
May 2011

EXTRA LIFE

GET MORE FROM YOUR GAMING

REINSTALL

CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED

Crusader: No Remorse

NO MERCY, NO REGRET, NOBODY CALL HIM BOBA

by Richard Cobbett

Overkill. The best kind of kill since 1342.

Crusader isn't about action, or even shooting. It's not about explosions, about story, or about saving the world from the generic totalitarian government in charge of it. It's about being That Guy. You know the one. The one the guards have no chance of stopping. The one who just walks through any trap. The one who's sent in alone to save the world because he and his gun are, if anything, overkill.

Action heroes don't get much sleeker than the Silencer—an unnamed, mute super-commando who worked for the evil, all-controlling World Economic Consortium until ordered to massacre a group of civilians. Refusing, he officially switched sides and joined up with the rebels instead, lending his gun, skill, and (most importantly) awesome-looking battle armor to their cause instead. Just one glance at him tells you you're many, many weight classes above most enemies you'll face.

For the time, *Crusader* was amazingly impressive. The high-resolution graphics were incredible, the number of animations and combat options almost ridiculous. What were stodgy controls then are now a little painful, but there's still plenty of power in being able to roll around, fire in 360 degrees, and unleash an armory of toys like scuttling spiderbots and placeable detpacks. Who doesn't love lots of big explosions?

No respect

It's the story side I still find most interesting, though, not in terms of the big plot (in summary: blah blah dystopia blah blah evil chairman blah blah Vigilance Platform), but in how *Crusader* treats you, the supposed hero and savior of the Resistance. Your first glimpse of it is after the first mission, when you return to base for a pat on the back, only to have your commanding officer practically spit in your face and make it clear you've been forced on him. The other rebels don't trust you as far as they could throw you, and remember: you're wearing *power armor*.

In fairness, they have a point. Not only do they have no reason to trust you, you haven't even taken their enemy's logo off. You're like an SS defector fighting for occupied France in a swastika-covered jacket purely because you think it looks cool. The best argument for you not being a double-agent is that one would never be so stupid.

Much of the story revolves around proving their suspicions wrong. There's never any hint that the Silencer himself cares what anyone thinks of him—he's a tool who's simply jumped into a different toolbox—but *you* do. Every time you return to base, it's to a propaganda-filled news post about how your mission to blow up an evil research lab was really an attack on the local puppy orphanage. Every time you get back, you hope your colleagues will finally take note of the fact that you really are on their side. And slowly but surely, they do, with nicknames like "Tin Man" give way to grudging acceptance, and ultimately respect.

Then they all get killed. Boo!

No casualties

While all played out using the hammy acting and blue-screen effects that absolutely scream "'90s PC game," it adds a surprisingly strong emotional core to the game that was sadly missing in the standalone expansion-pack-style sequel, *No Regret*. It even adds something to the missions themselves, where guards will inevitably be blown up, burned alive, or melted into goo for your entertainment, but there's a personal reason to keep the engineers and other civilians alive. You don't have to. In fact, if you kill everyone, the game doesn't care. It still feels right to try, though, if only to set a good example for the others.

Besides, if not for the civilians, who'd leave all those convenient passwords and keycards lying around? *Crusader* wasn't the first game to use the

READ ME

RELEASE DATE
1995

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER
Origin

GET IT
$5.99 — Good Old Games

VIDEO GUIDE
Let's Play Crusader: No Remorse
bit.ly/mQE8rB

TRIVIA
Crusader: No Remorse used the same engine (albeit a modified version) as *Ultima VIII: Pagan*. While a much simpler game than that RPG, *Crusader* uses the engine much better. It has a higher resolution, more detailed graphics, far better controls, and—most importantly—a game that isn't *Ultima VIII: Pagan*. The semi-sequel, *No Regret*, was just a new set of missions. A proper *Crusader 2* was on the cards though and would almost certainly have used something more advanced, but was aborted along with the rest of the series when creator Tony Zurovec left Origin.

YOUR PC IN 1993
486DX, 8MB RAM, Super VGA, CD-ROM, 15" monitor

MOST REGRETTABLE DEATH
UV-9 Pulsar

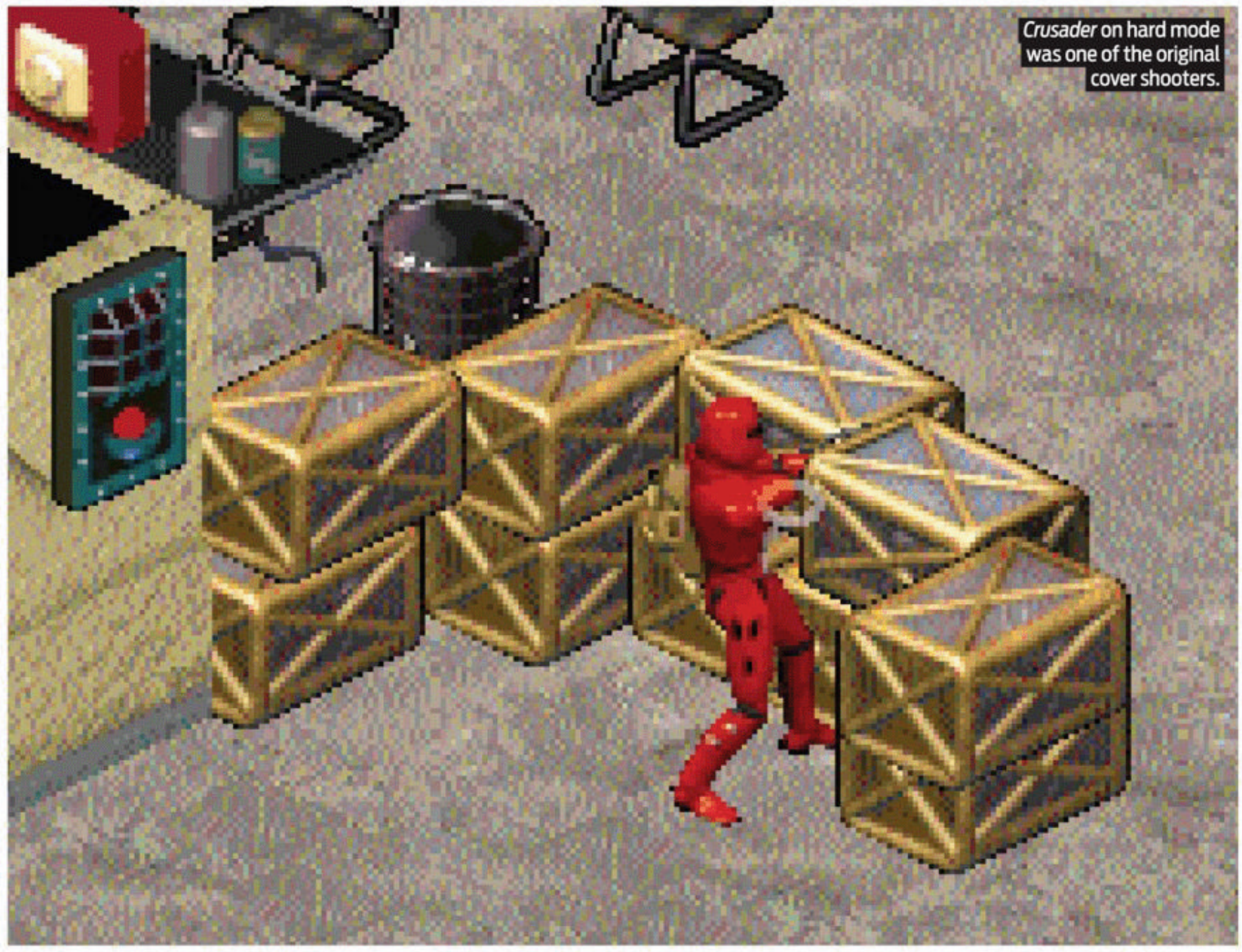
MOST '90S ACTION
Weasel

"everyone is a forgetful cretin who should be fired immediately for leaving vital codes less than two steps from the stupid door" school of security, but it remains one of the worst offenders. Oddly, it's less noticeable now than it was at the time. Like health packs fixing up rockets to the face, these days we're just inured to the silly.

Crusader's primary weakness is that it falls between two different genres. It's not fast paced and fluid enough to be a great action game, but nor do the extra bits it bolts on add enough to make it a hybrid. There's a bit of stealth, but you're not going to play it as a stealth game. You get plenty of gadgets, but it's hardly *Deus Ex*. It's impossible to play without wishing it could have the flexibility of 3D, even knowing that the technology of the day would never have been up to the challenge.

Crusader's primary weakness is that it falls between two different genres.

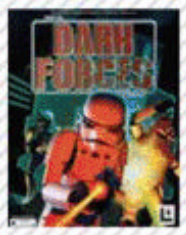
Still, if the suits at EA (which currently holds the *Crusader* license) are looking for a franchise to reboot, they could certainly do worse than dig the Silencer up for one last mission. ■



OTHER 1995 GAMES WE ♥

WARCRAFT II
Lucas: My first exposure to videogame gore came from watching my Ogre-Mage's body decompose after he was ruthlessly slaughtered by a pack of enemy Knights. And it was frickin' sweet!

MECHWARRIOR 2
Evan: Hulking robots get the best game mechanics: heat management, modular damage and limb loss, missile locks, throttle, and weapon allocation. All that complexity made being a MechWarrior feel like a satisfying split between piloting and engineering.



STAR WARS: DARK FORCES
Greg: I finally felt like I had jumped into the *Star Wars* universe with Kyle Katarn as my guide. Blasting stormtroopers away with thermal detonators never felt so good.

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1 Re-cycle San Andreas

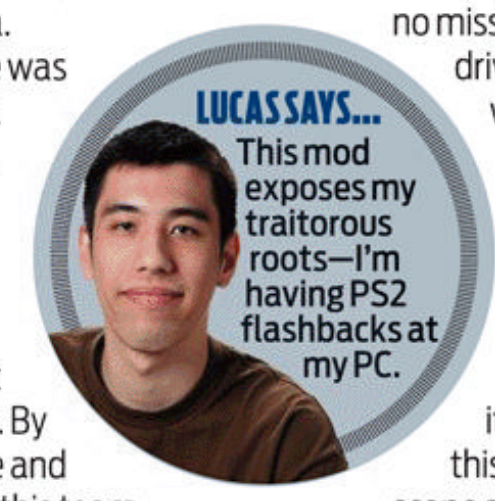
MOD GO FOR A BIKE RIDE AROUND **GTA IV: SAN ANDREAS**

As mod projects go, there are few more ambitious than recreating *GTA: San Andreas* as a mod for *GTA IV*. It's crazy. It's one of those mods that you expect someone to start but never actually release. Except the team has already put out the first beta.

San Andreas's greatest feature was always the state itself, a colossal map boasting three major cities, 12 small towns, mountains, deserts, rivers, and its own versions of the Hoover Dam and Area 51. *GTA IV* scaled its world down but created an engine that has proven itself capable of a lot. By combining the biggest *GTA* game and the most technically impressive, this team has achieved something incredible.

As a bonus, the mod comes with a built-in version of ICEnhancer, which boosts the performance of *GTA IV*'s Rage engine with shaders and lighting effects. This means that although the models and textures have not yet been updated to take full advantage of the new engine, it already looks like a significant improvement on the original. It also means that when the mod makers do make those improvements, the game will look truly amazing.

With this being the first beta release, there are no missions, no pedestrians, and no AI drivers. However the mod does come with a version of the GTA4 Simple Trainer (*bit.ly/7TCSbf*), which lets you spawn pedestrians and cars by pressing F3.



What has been included is the entirety of the *San Andreas* state (barring some interiors)—and all of it is unlocked from the start. Playing this mod reminds you of the massive scope and ambition of *GTA: San Andreas*. For those who just want to look around, it's the perfect playground.

It might be unfinished, but at this early stage *GTA IV: San Andreas* is still hugely impressive, and it absolutely drips with potential. **Tom Hatfield**

SIZE 1.1GB **LINK** gtaivsa.com

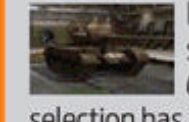
2 SKINS

TANK TOPS

BRIGHTEN UP YOUR *WORLD OF TANKS* WITH THESE SKINS

Even the biggest tankhead can get bored with the default *World of Tanks* vehicles. Here's a collection of the best and most ridiculous custom skins.

Hitzone skins

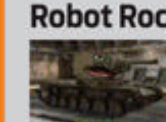


For those who want every edge, this skin set highlights the vulnerable areas on each tank so you can learn to place your shots accurately. *bit.ly/mZmvfX*

GDI skins

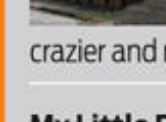
Re-skinning all tanks in the style of *Command & Conquer*'s GDI faction, this selection has an appealingly gritty, beaten-up, and rusty look. *bit.ly/o4U5LO*

Robot Rockstar's skins



These share a certain style. From giant jaws to jokes painted on the side, they get crazier and more fun. *bit.ly/nuwBqS*

My Little Pony skins



Great for undermining the intimidation factor of high tier tanks. That Maus is far less threatening in pink. *bit.ly/pa4G7f*

3 Human Resolution

MOD AUGMENT YOUR GAME WITH DEUS EX: NEW VISION

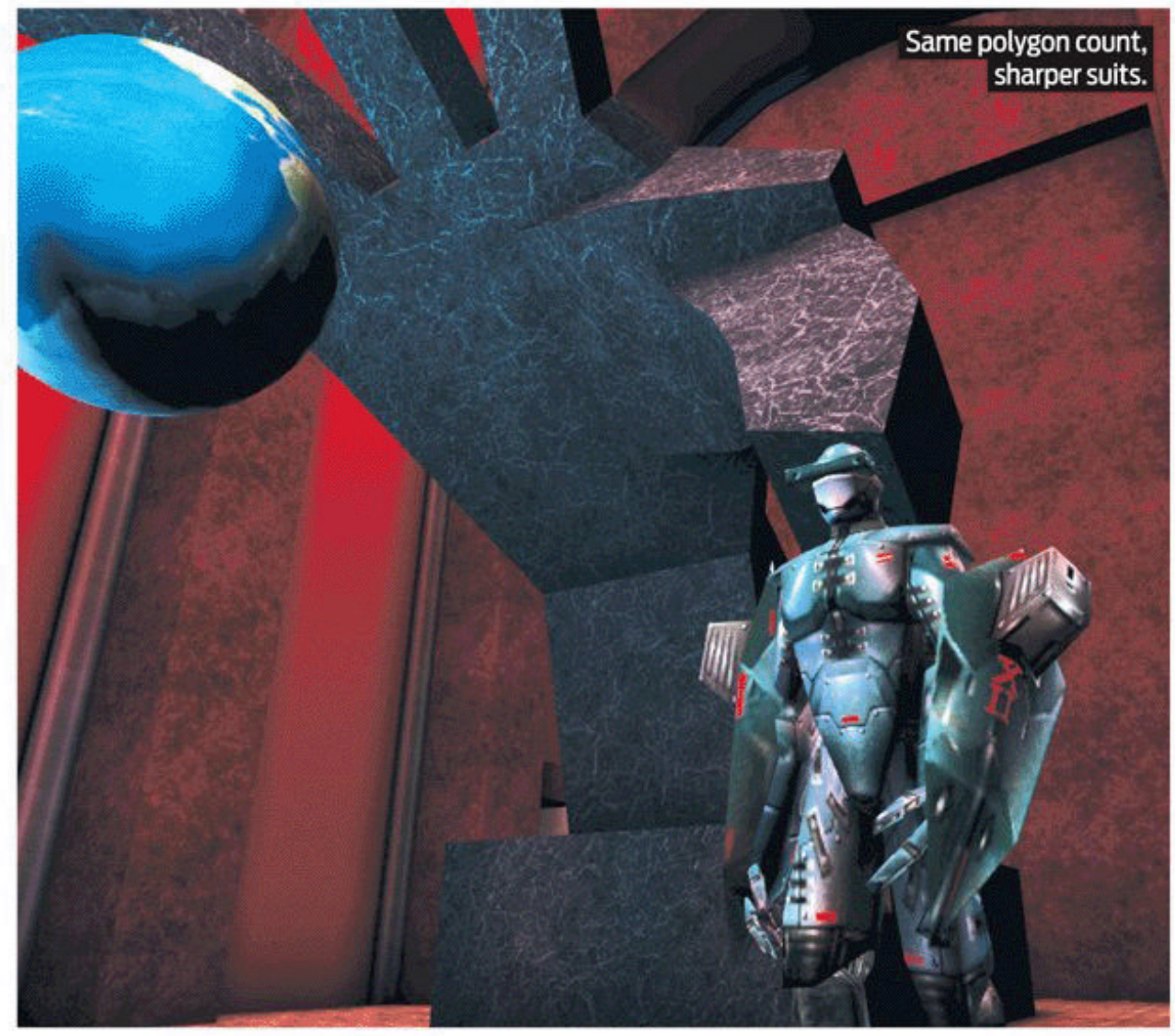
With *Human Revolution* now out, many of you will be wanting to revisit the original *Deus Ex*, and some of you will be trying it for the first time. If you're put off by the clunky, low-res visuals of that first game, why not jazz them up with this revamp?

Deus Ex: New Vision replaces 75 percent of the textures with new, high-res ones. The difference is striking. Tracer Tong's lab glows with neon beauty, the Templar cathedral broods with gothic majesty, and Hong Kong is a true cyberpunk playground.

The models remain their blocky selves, but this mod goes a long way toward making a great old game look sharp and detailed. It's astonishing how much of a difference that extra sharpness makes.

New Vision comes packaged with a custom *Deus Ex* launcher, which makes running the game much easier on modern PCs. You can find full instructions for using it at *bit.ly/7jTKes*. **TH**

SIZE 1.5GB LINK bit.ly/aDyJyi


Same polygon count, sharper suits.

4 Drop into paradise

MAP TURN *CRYSIS* INTO HEAVEN WITH EORZEA

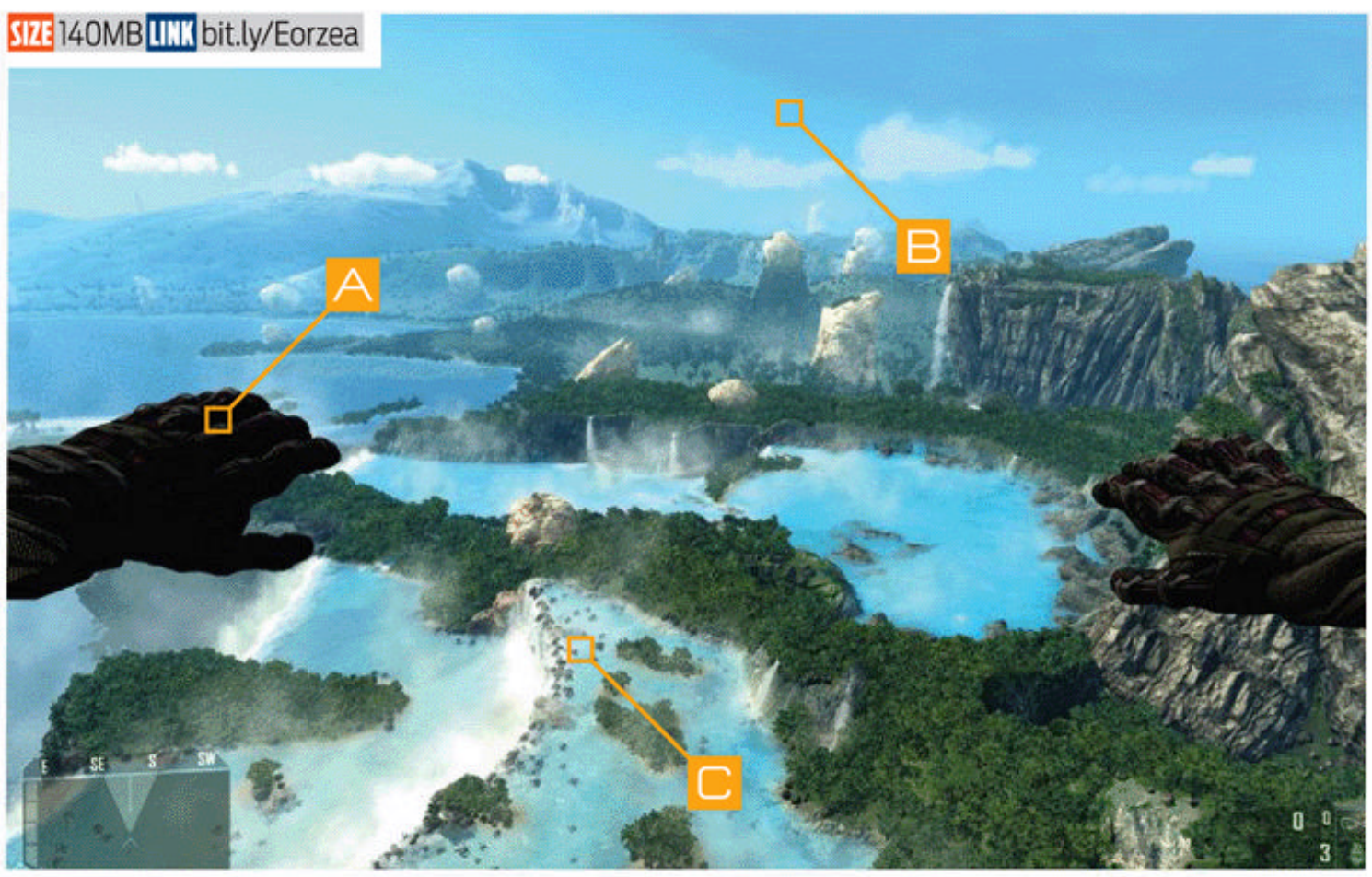
The scene is from *Final Fantasy XIV*, but it's only glimpsed in a cinematic trailer. Ulysses182 has built the entire place in *Crysis*, and it's beautiful. No enemies, no objective, just staggering scenery.

A FLYING START
When you start the map, you're falling. So add -devmode to the end of your *Crysis* shortcut, or your launch options in Steam. Hit ~ to get the console, type "map FFXIV," then hit F3 to float.

B ENLIGHTENMENT
It's also night, so bring the console down again and type "e_time_of_day 8.5" to let there be light. You can also type "r_displayinfo 0" to get rid of all the developer stuff on screen. That's better.

C CASCADE
The place is a terrace of spectacular waterfalls, so be sure to have Water, Volumetric Effects, Shaders, and Particles set to Very High. Will it chug? Will it ever. But you can just sit back and enjoy the view.

SIZE 140MB LINK bit.ly/Eorzea



5 WEBGAME

GET STUCK

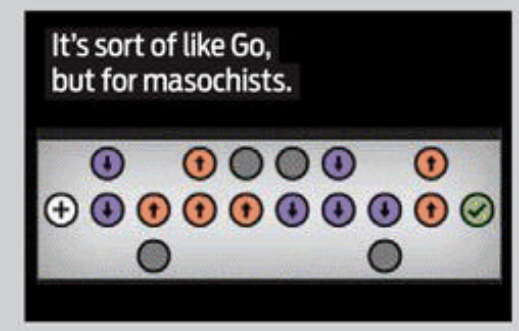
SOLVE THE SIMPLE BUT SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE *IMPASSE*

You've got to get to the exit on the right, but there are dots in the way. Each time you move vertically, the "up" dots move up and the "down" dots move down. So you have to jiggle yourself up and down to get them in the arrangement you want. The only problem is, it's impossible. Seriously. Look, every time I move, that thing moves so that it blocks that thing, so there's absolutely no way I can ever... ohhh, wait! I see it!

This one, though, is impossible. This new dot type blinks in and out of existence, and I'm trapped in sync with it so—ohhh, wait! I see it!

For real, though, the one after that is impossible. **TH**

SIZE Web game LINK bit.ly/Impasse


It's sort of like Go, but for masochists.

How to master the infinite caverns

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy

TIME Five hours

VITAL LINKS

Official wiki
bit.ly/terrariawiki

PCG's *Terraria* beginner's guide
bit.ly/pcgterraria

Terrafirma map viewer
bit.ly/terrafirmamod

Terraria mods and tweaks
bit.ly/modsandtweaks

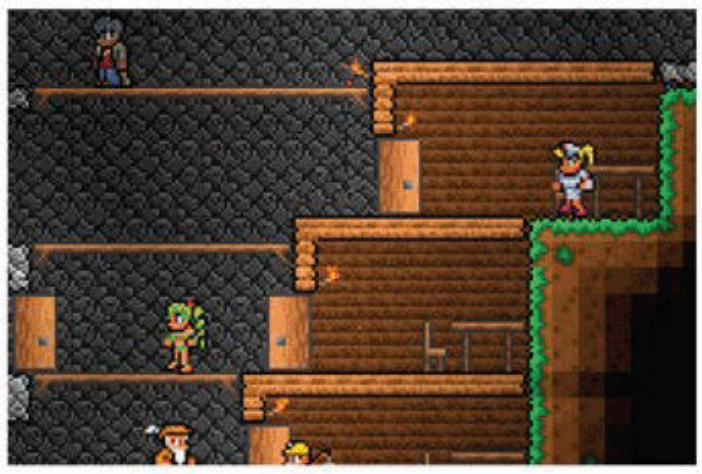
DUNCAN GEERE'S GUIDE TO CONQUERING **TERRARIA**

Terraria looks like *Minecraft* remade as a 2D platformer. It takes the sandbox digging, building, and exploring formula and adds lasers, chandeliers, death-worms, acorns, rocket boots, and floating eyeballs. This is a guide to finding and fighting that cool stuff.

Much of the cool stuff (or equipment you need to get it) is made by crafting. Hit Escape at any time to see a list of the items you can craft, and click on an item to make it. You can then place it into a free slot in your inventory along the top, or drop it into the world.

What you can make depends on the resources you've gathered and what you're standing next to. Stand next to a workbench, for example, and you can make more advanced items. So building a workbench is one of your first priorities. Hit trees to gather wood, bring up the crafting menu, and click the workbench. Put it on the ground next to you, and stand near it any time you want to do some crafting. If you're wondering what you can make, present an ingredient to the Guide NPC you'll see wandering around—he'll tell you what other items it can be made into.

As for the rest, let's get to it.



1 Attract some NPCs

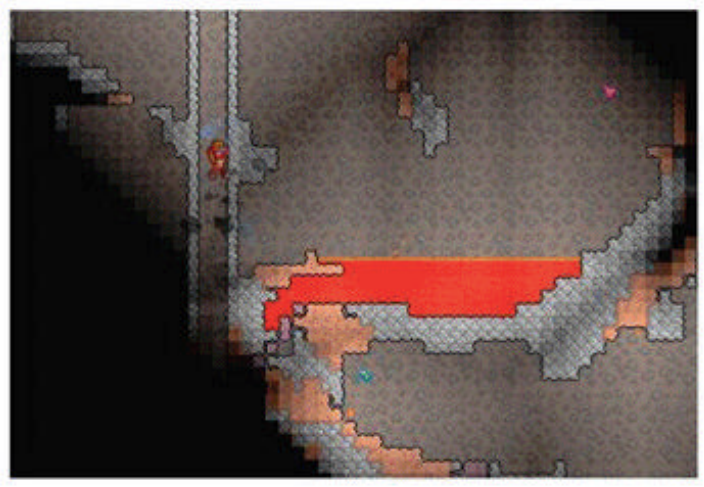
First, build yourself a house out of wooden blocks. Then make a table, chair, door, wall, and a torch to put in it: all basic recipes you can learn from the Guide. Once you're done, build a few more next to it: NPC characters will move in. There are several, but the first that you're likely to see is the merchant, who arrives after you amass 50 silver coins. You can sell unwanted items to him in exchange for gold, and buy torches, axes, and other equipment.

2 Survive a blood moon

There's a one in seven chance each night that a blood moon will occur. You'll know when it does because the sky will turn a deep red and the message "The Blood Moon is rising" will appear. Oh, and your house will be flooded with zombies who can suddenly open doors. To survive, you can place blocks behind doors so that they can't open them, dig a 2x2 trench in front of your door, or go out fighting to earn bonus money and items.

3 Get a grappling hook

Everyone needs a grappling hook. You'll need a furnace and about 42 iron ore, obtained by mining. A furnace just takes 3 torches, 4 wood, and 20 stone blocks. You can use that to smelt the ore, then use the iron bars to make three iron chains and an anvil. The only tricky part is getting a hook: they're dropped rarely by the skeletons, dead miners, and piranhas you'll find in the cavern layer, where the backdrop walls turn into a darker stone.



4 Create a dropshaft

After you've dug down some way, you'll start getting lost in your own tunnels. The fastest way to descend is to create a sealed dropshaft with a soft landing at the bottom. Mine a shaft two blocks wide straight down, until you reach the desired level. Then place some water or cobwebs to break your fall. To get through air pockets, drop sand below you and tunnel through it. To navigate water or lava, place dirt and mine it out.

5 Find the Corruption

When you're comfortable defeating most monsters and want more of a challenge, head left or right from your spawn point until the sky goes yellow and the grass turns purple. This is the Corruption, and it's full of deep chasms and tougher monsters. At the bottom of most chasms is a Shadow Orb which, when broken, drops awesome items. However, it also summons meteors and can cause boss creatures to attack.

6 Mine a meteor

Every time you smash a Shadow Orb at the bottom of a Corruption chasm, there's a 50 percent chance that a meteor will land somewhere. You'll need a gold pickaxe or better to mine it, but the ore that it yields can create some amazing weaponry and armor. When you find the crash site, be careful of the Meteorite Heads that it spawns, and don't touch the blocks directly because they'll hurt you. Use dynamite for fast, efficient mining.

7 Mix a potion

You can mix dozens of potions. To do so, you'll need a table and workbench with a bottle placed on top, and a range of ingredients. The full list can be found on the *Terraria* wiki, but two useful early potions are the light-creating Shine potion (bottled water, daybloom, glowing mushroom) and the treasure-finding Spelunker potion (bottled water, blinkroot, moonglow, gold ore). Show ingredients to the Guide to find more recipes.

8 Find an island

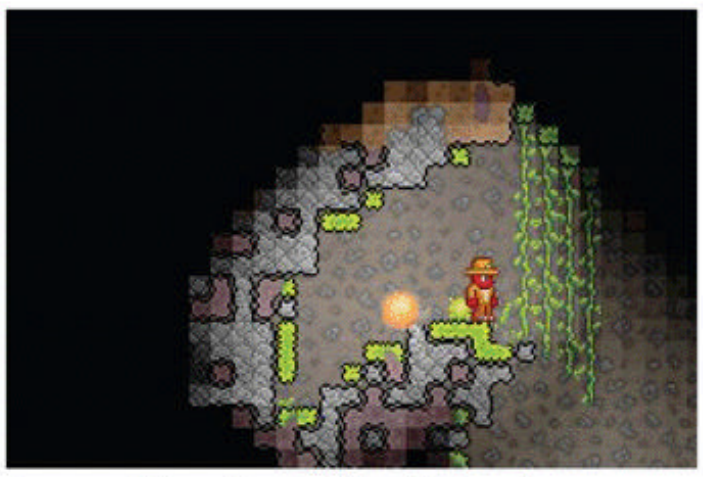
Floating out of sight, above the top of the screen, are weird islands hovering in the sky. They have valuable ore, items, and weapons, but they can be tricky to find. The best approach earlier in the game is to fire a musket into the sky and listen carefully. If you hear the sound of vines being cut, that indicates that there's an island above you. Build a column of dirt upward to reach it, and be sure to take a good look inside the chest you find there.

9 Beat your first boss

When you've got 200 health, made some silver armor (mine silver ore, smelt it), and attracted at least three NPCs, a message may warn of "an evil presence watching you." This marks the approach of the Eye of Cthulhu. To prepare, build a long flat platform in the sky and buy 200 shuriken and some health potions from the merchant. Once it arrives, hurl shuriken at its pupil while dodging its attacks. Drink health potions and you'll be fine.

10 Survive the goblins

Once you've smashed a Shadow Orb and acquired more than 200 health, there's a chance a goblin army will invade. To fight them most efficiently, dig a deep pit outside your house, then use grenades to kill several at once. Alternatively, create wide lava trenches that aren't deep enough to destroy items (test with a copper coin and widen if it disappears) but will still deal damage. Be extra careful of the sorcerers with ranged attacks.



11 Explore the jungle

One of the most dangerous areas of the game is the underground jungle, which is packed with swarms of hornets, bats, and piranhas. It can be found deep underground in the cavern layer, about two-thirds of the way toward an edge of the map. The rewards for exploring it are worth the risk—unique weapons, resources, and armor are available in the shrines found in its verdant caverns.

12 Enter the dungeon

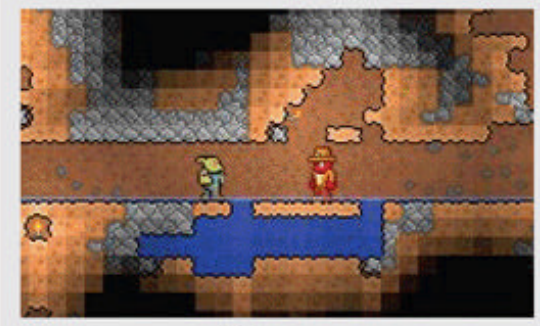
On the opposite side of the world from the jungle is the dungeon. An old man guards the entrance, and if you try to enter without talking to him, you'll be slaughtered. Talking to him at night will turn him into a huge skull with arms. Once you defeat him (use your most powerful weapons and plenty of health potions), enter the dungeon to find the most rare and impressive weaponry in the game.

SKILLS

DOMINATE IN PVP

HOW TO FIGHT THE GOOD *TERRARIA* FIGHT AND WIN

1 Have good ranged and melee weapons. Bows and arrows can be effective over distance, but guns and boomerangs are easier to hit with. In melee, fast, lower-damage flails are often better than swords.



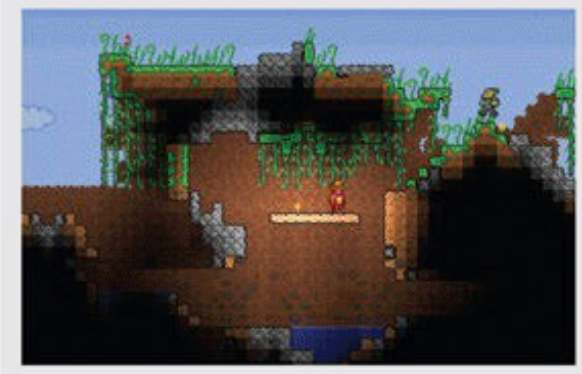
2 Maneuverability is more important than armor. Equip Hermes Boots, Necro Armor, or an Anklet of the Wind to flee from more powerful opponents, and a Cloud in a Bottle to cover rough terrain quickly.

3 Traps can be more effective than weapons. Lava pits can be combined with falling sand to take out a powerful character quickly. Use corrupt seeds or meteorites to distract opponents with NPC enemies, too.

BONUS TIP

IN THE MIX

Swiftness and Invisibility potions can be invaluable. Stock up before you enter the match.



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SAMSUNG

The Wonder of Samsung

TESTED

D2342P Passive 3D Monitor

LG

Good news! LG's Flatron D2342P monitor allows for 3D gaming on the cheap! That said, the 3D experience it offers is, well, kind of cheap.

The D2342P looks great on paper: it's got a tasty 23-inch serving of 1080p-capable 3D gaming and movie glory. And with sleek lines, a glossy piano-black bezel, and matching stand, it looks even better when it's assembled and sitting on your desk. Sadly, looks aren't everything, and once you get past this beauty's aesthetics, there's not a lot left to love.

For starters, the external housing feels pretty flimsy. This wouldn't be such a bad thing if you could be confident that the monitor would stay where you put it, but one of the first things I noticed after setup is that it moves around on the desk in response to the mild vibrations caused by typing. Even worse, anything more than a light touch to the side of its bezel left it wobbling back and forth like a Weeble on a bender. It never fell over, but if your rage-quits include a lot of gesticulation, this ain't the monitor you're looking for.

You could also run into problems if your desk sits on the low side, as the D2342P's stand only offers 15 degrees of backward tilt. However, as the monitor is VESA compatible, it can be mounted on a wall or an articulated arm, making up for the shallow amount of out-of-the-box tilt LG provides for. As for connections, the D2342P covers the bases, and comes equipped with a headphone jack, HDMI, DVI and VGA ports.

Even if you're able to get past setup issues, the performance isn't great. While the D2342P is capable of rocking a resolution of 1920x1080, its color quality is a washed-out disappointment in both 2D and 3D, with black tones—something that LED displays have traditionally handled well—often appearing in both games and movies as dark grays.

The big selling point for this bad boy is that the D2342P is capable of providing 3D video at a significantly lower price point than hardware that uses Nvidia's 3D Vision Kit technology. LG delivers this by outfitting the D2342P with its own proprietary passive 3D technology. Despite the rest of the monitor's failings, the D2342P does serve up a satisfactory 3D gaming and video experience, albeit with some pretty substantial ghosting whenever there is a large amount of movement on screen. It just goes to show that in life, and in this case, with 3D monitors, you get what you pay for. ■ *Seamus Bellamy*

VERDICT

While it might provide a relatively inexpensive gateway into the world of 3D gaming, the D2342P has too many shortcomings to overlook.

PC GAMER **50**

SPEC Price $350 ◆ **Size** 23" (diagonal) ◆ **Resolution** 1020x1080 ◆ **Aspect Ratio** 16:9 ◆ **Ports** HDMI, DVI, VGA ◆ **Type** Passive 3D ◆ **Link** www.lg.com ◆ **Category** Mid

Have you been waiting for an affordable 3D gaming solution? Wait a little longer.

TESTED

Scratching the surfaces

(Cyborg RAT 9 mouse shown for scale)

Behemoth Regulator

This mousepad's texture is a total throwback to the '90s, when foam reigned supreme. (I vaguely recall buying one like this in a bargain bin at Fry's.) Despite its chintzy appearance, however, it's surprisingly comfortable—like a Tempur-Pedic mattress for your wrists. Its long, rectangular shape means tons of tracking room, so there's a considerable safety net to avoid your mouse dropping off the edges. But because of its surface, it's a dust-bunny magnet, which is annoying when you've gotta pick them off the bottom of your mouse. It's a decent pad overall, but its large shape isn't for everyone. 73

$10 ◆ OCZ ◆ www.ocztechnology.com ◆ Category: Entry

GP-MP8000

Some people say that size doesn't matter, but I guarantee you that those people haven't actually experienced anything this big. So, yeah—this sucker's as big as a 13-inch laptop (and it'll invade your precious desk space, shoving your keyboard aside with its imposing dimensions), but it's worth it. Heavy-duty MMO raiders and *StarCraft* strategists will drool over the real estate; they'll also adore the fact that the mouse doesn't drop off the pad while they're swinging about frantically. As long as you've got a gigantic desk and some long arms to accommodate it, this monster will last you for years. 85

$15 ◆ Gigabyte ◆ www.gigabyte.com ◆ Category: Entry

9HD

The 9HD is a bare-bones professional mousepad, but it still performs like the big guys. It's roughly the size of a magazine, is easy to slide in and out of your backpack, and can be cleaned with a quick wipe of a damp cloth. Mice coast across it effortlessly, and you won't lose tracking even with sporadic gesticulations as you're struggling to heal your troops in *Team Fortress 2*. If your focus is more on travel and LAN parties (and you're not bathing in cash), the 9HD is a terrific choice. 85

$35 ◆ SteelSeries ◆ www.steelseries.com ◆ Category: Mid

Microtracker

The MicroTracker Mousepad's makers posit that it'll eliminate all of your mouse frustrations forever. They're wrong. Very, very wrong. Guiding an optical or laser mouse across the MicroTracker's microfiber surface is like pushing a vacuum cleaner over a shag carpet—it drags along and pulls the microfibers every which way, which is damned aggravating. Don't think about playing games on this thing, or even moving your mouse across it for simple tasks like opening a document. On the other hand, you could always just use the MicroTracker for its other advertised use—cleaning your screen. 40

$9 ◆ CTA ◆ www.powerthreads.com ◆ Category: Entry

Eight new mouse pads to ramp up your game *by Florence Ion*

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Ironclad

If only life were as smooth sailing as a mouse on the Ironclad's delightful, aluminum surface. This entire pad is literally a metal sheet, and its sandblasted surface is perfect for lining up long-distance headshots. Better yet, the Ironclad's rubber base stays put while you're focusing on the important stuff such as machine-gunning Tangos in *Counter-Strike*. The surface is easy to clean and doesn't attract any mouse gunk, and it's perfectly safe to transport in the included (and stout) plastic carrying case. **95**

$60 ◆ Razer ◆ www.razerzone.com ◆ Category: Mid

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Warpad

The WarPad's 17- by 14-inch surface clips to the edge of your desk, which prevents the mousepad from slipping backward during feverish gameplay. Additionally, it enables fantastic wrist support, which is key for ergonomics—something that gamers should always take into consideration when they're shopping for gear. The WarPad's design also leaves your desk space's sovereignty intact since it lies vertically rather than horizontally, and the tracking is nice and easy. Finally—a cloth mousepad that does it right! **92**

$55 ◆ XFX ◆ www.xfxforce.com ◆ Category: Mid

Fierce Teflon & Steel

Because of the Teflon's frictionless, metallic surface, your mouse will coast across this pad just as easily as your breakfast comes off a Teflon pan. Its overall size is roughly identical to the SteelSeries 9HD, but much more brawny. It's pleasantly smooth to the touch, though it's a magnet for greasy fingerprints. It's a good feel for first-person shooter fans who need the quick reaction time, but if you also use your mouse for things like graphic design, the tracking feels a little loose. If you're looking for a smooth metal surface, Rude's Teflon mouse surface is a fair buy. But if you can afford it, stick with the Ironclad. **74**

$29 ◆ Rude Gameware ◆ www.rudegameware.com ◆ Category: Mid

Mionix Sargus 460

There are big mousepads, and then there are some so maddeningly bloated that you have to start charging them rent. Mionix's Sargas 460 is one such offender. Measuring in at about the same size as a standard 21-inch monitor, dealing with where to put your keyboard so it's still accessible (and level) is a frustrating conundrum. Fortunately, mice feel amazing as they shoot across the surface, and you can get away with orienting it vertically to save some space on your desktop. But again, as the Sargus proves, there is such thing as overkill. **70**

$20 ◆ Mionix ◆ www.mionix.net ◆ Category: Entry

PHOTOS BY BARAK SHARAMA

TESTED

Nvidia 3D Vision Wired Glasses

3D's barrier to entry just got lower

Although I'm a little sick of 3D hype, I have to admit that gaming in 3D is more immersive, more tactile, and generally a lot of fun. Nvidia must agree, as it's expanding its 3D Vision line with a less-expensive wired model of its 3D glasses. That lower price comes hand in hand with easy setup—as long as you've got the necessary components (3D Vision-ready monitor, Nvidia GeForce video card, up-to-date drivers) the glasses are pretty much plug-and-play.

Most games work with very little configuration, but some, like *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, simply will not run with Nvidia's 3D Vision (thanks to an exclusive deal for AMD's 3D products; you can check Nvidia's site for a mostly comprehensive list of which games *will* work). And as with most 3D hardware, 3D Vision effectively halves your monitor's brightness, meaning you won't want to use it in a well-lit room.

The glasses themselves are largely the same as the wireless version, though the build quality is noticeably cheaper on the wired model. The set is matte instead of shiny, has more visible seams, and just generally feels a bit more plasticky than the wireless version. The wire is a long 10 feet and never left me feeling overly tethered, though it did have an unfortunate tendency to get tangled up.

The glasses come with swappable nose-pads, but even with them, I've never found the 3D Vision set to be very comfortable. Also, as with most active shutter glasses, the lenses are pretty narrow, which means they intrude on my peripheral vision more than I'd like.

At $99, the wired 3D Vision glasses are two-thirds the price of the wireless alternative. I'm not crazy about the build quality or design, but the 3D technology is a lot of fun, and these glasses are the cheapest, fastest way to get it on your PC. ■ ***Alex Castle***

PC GAMER **79**

$99 ◆ www.nvidia.com ◆ Category: Mid

Q&A

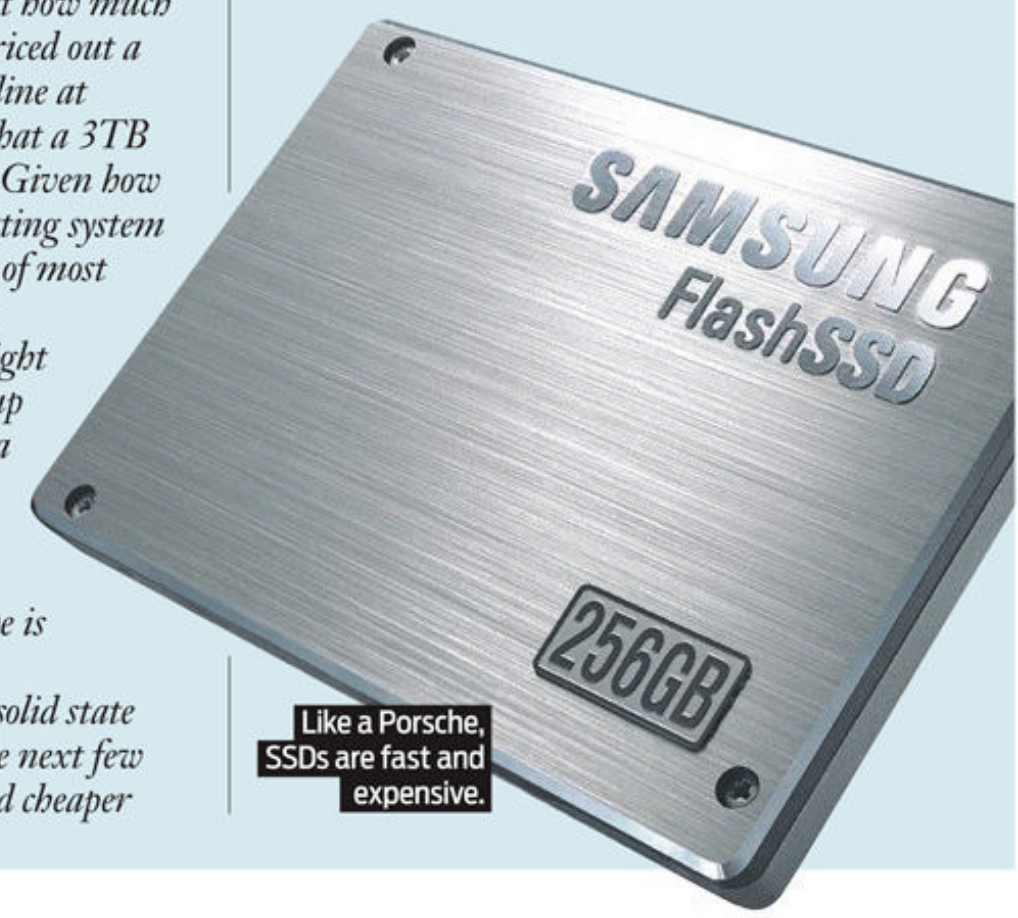
Solid State Update

Q: I keep hearing about solid state drives being really great for gaming. Is it worth thinking about an upgrade?

A: *When you're talking about load times or frames per second, solid state drives can often perform up to 50 percent faster than conventional mechanical hard drives without even breaking a sweat. But it's not all win: that wicked speed comes along with a pretty wicked price tag. Just how much more expensive is it? We priced out a 120GB solid state drive online at $120—the same amount that a 3TB hard drive would run you. Given how much space your rig's operating system takes up, and the beefy size of most modern gaming titles, that 120GB solid state drive might be speedy, but it would fill up pretty fast. For gamers on a budget, grabbing a spacious 3TB mechanical hard drive for the same price as that solid state drive is a no-brainer.*

Fortunately, the price of solid state drives is sure to fall over the next few years as manufacturers find cheaper ways to make them. When that happens, you'll see higher capacity SSDs become available for more reasonable prices.

In the meantime, you might want to consider using your computer's current hard drive and installing a solid state drive to hold any games where a little bump in processing speed can make all the difference between owning your opponents or getting taken down in a hail of virtual gunfire and frag grenades. ■ ***Seamus Bellamy***



Like a Porsche, SSDs are fast and expensive.

Hard Stuff Trinity

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CASE AND PSU Thermaltake Level 10; Antec HCP 1,200W PSU	$1,150	**CASE AND PSU** Corsair 800D; Corsair TX 750W PSU	$395	**CASE AND PSU** NZXT Phantom; Corsair 500W PSU	$210
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SOUNDCARD Creative X-Fi Sound Blaster Titanium HD	$164	**SOUNDCARD** Creative X-Fi Sound Blaster Titanium	$87	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0
VIDEOCARD Nvidia GeForce GTX 580 (x2)	$1,000	**VIDEOCARD** Gigabyte Super Overclock Series GeForce GTX 560 Ti	$265	**VIDEOCARD** EVGA GeForce GTX 550 Ti	$150
TOTAL PRICE	**$4,200**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$1,482**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$678**

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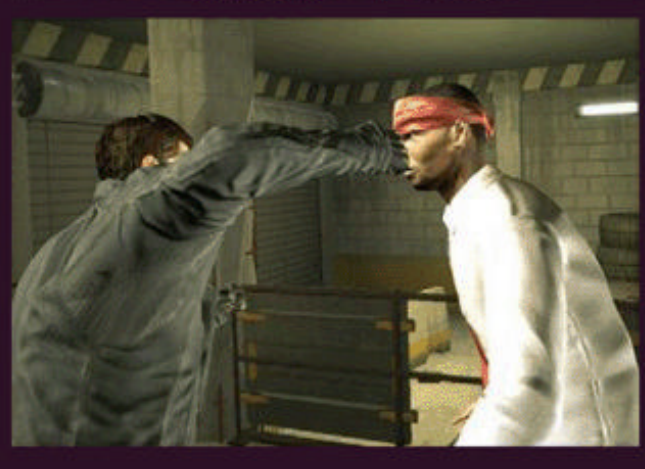
Jensen's Blog



03/26/27
Terrorist attack at the office today. Some Russian thug almost got me, but I don't walk around corners blind. Shot him in the head and saved Megan.

Nice of Sarif to check up on me, but he seemed almost disappointed that I was OK.

03/29/27
Nearly slipped on an augmentation pamphlet at the top of the stairs today—I swear someone's leaving them there on purpose.

Sarif still being nice—keeps telling me to "Break an arm!" each time he sends me on a mission. I think he's getting that wrong, but I don't like to say anything.

09/12/27
Sorry I haven't been keeping up with this, it's been a busy six months.

Another attack today, this time at our factoring plant. Easy enough to deal with the Purity First chumps, but the door to the server room was locked and they'd changed the code.

Complete brick wall. I don't know how Sarif expects me to deal with this crap—it's not like I have a hacking suite built into my brain.

In the end I had to walk all the way back out to the roof and ask SWAT to go in. The terrorists gassed the hostages, and Josie Thorpe was shot. What a trainwreck.

09/13/27
Great, now Sarif wants me to break into a police station. I'm not some kind of freaking super-agent, how does he think I'm gonna get past that many cops? Turn invisible?

09/15/27
Screwed up a mission today. Got to the rooftops in D-Row Ballers territory, but couldn't find a safe way down and they spotted me.

Sarif's letting me go. Already hired some auged-up jackass to replace me.

It's funny, though—you know what's *really* bothering me? I keep losing my stupid sunglasses.

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